

**Mixing it up: Cooking end-of-the-semester project for the introductory  
management class**

**Abstract:**

During this session, I will present an engaging and memorable end-of-semester project for my Management Skills class, called *Mixing it up*. This project requires students to prepare a dish with a given list of ingredients and a limited budget. Students are also tasked with a presentation on the dish that describes their journey as well as a discussion on problems encountered and lessons learned. I will not only provide the conference participants with the opportunity to hear about my project, but I will also encourage colleagues to provide feedback and share their own most memorable assignments.

**Key words:** end-of-semester project, management functions, project management

## **Introduction**

Reflecting upon my experience as a student, I realized that my most memorable and beneficial semester projects were those that required application of learned material with a dash of creativity. Indeed, the literature on creative problem-solving supports the notion that creative problem-solving is a powerful tool that could foster student's engagement and motivation to learn.

While pondering upon the details for an end-of-semester project in my Management Skills class, I recognized that as part of the assignment goals, I wanted students to demonstrate 1) application of class material, 2) creative problem-solving, and 3) critical reflection on the process, all while having a more relaxed atmosphere, involving soft drinks and food. The *Mixing it up* project was born.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

In creative problem-solving, subjects collaborate to solve a problem, or accomplish a task based in reality, without a known and fixed solution (Caswell, 2006). Thus, this approach forces students to experience the team dynamics, while addressing problems that are real, yet vague in regard to outcome specificity. Ultimately, creative problem-solving allows students to apply the material; it also encourages them to use and sharpen their communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills.

Engaging students in creative problem-solving involves activities in three triads (Caswell, 2006). In the Fundamental Triad (Caswell, 2006), students 1) familiarize themselves with the task or problem at hand, 2) clarify the issue and the process of resolution, and 3) examine the effectiveness solution. In the Harmonizing Structure Triad (Caswell, 2006), students communicate, visualize, and collaborate on understanding the problem and brainstorming on

possible solutions. During the final triad, the Theoretical Environment (Caswell, 2006), participants narrate, participate, and inquire in the development of the solution to the problem.

Ultimately, Caswell's (2006) problem-solving framework allows students to be actively involved in their knowledge creation. This actual hands-on engagement leads to positive outcomes such as academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction, and social engagement (Astin, 1984, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Goodsell, Maher, & Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

With these considerations in mind, I have designed a project that requires students to prepare a dish with a given list of ingredients (pre-approved with consideration of dietary restrictions) and a limited budget (\$10 per student; exceeding team's budget is penalized). To successfully create the dish, students had to actively engage in planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, which were the key concepts in the course. To further enhance their learning, students had to bring their dish to class and engage in a graded discussion about their journey, problems that they encountered, and the lessons that they learned. Thus, students had to accomplish a real task (cook a dish), without a known and fixed solution (Caswell, 2006), where no specific recipe is provided, but rather a limiting list of ingredients. As such, the project forces students to:

1. Understand the problem, do research, brainstorm, produce a solution, and assess its the effectiveness in terms of incorporating specific ingredients and not exceeding a set budget (Fundamental Triad; Caswell, 2006).

2. Communicate, visualize, and collaborate among team members on tackling and finishing the task of making a dish (Harmonizing Structure Triad; Caswell, 2006).

3. Discuss, present, and elaborate on lessons learned from their cooking project (Theoretical Environment; Caswell, 2006).

### **Learning Objectives**

Incorporating the *Mixing it up* project in my class is guided by a few objectives.

Objective 1: To develop students' understanding about the management discipline, using creativity and hands-on application as well as self-reflection. More specifically, students learn about topics, models, and theories through self-guided research, brainstorming, discoveries, applications, and presentations. This objective also aids students in applying critical thinking to business situations and recommending managerial responses.

Objective 2: To encourage students to communicate more effectively with and in front of others. Creative problem-solving forces students to communicate with one another, provide and receive feedback, and actively listen to ideas and suggestions.

Objective 3: To allow students to become effective team members through collaboration. As an integral part of the creative problem-solving methodology, students are forced to contribute, help, and create positive experience with others on the team as well as realize approaches to working with or managing persons different from themselves.

I also have three goals in mind for the conference session:

Goal A: To provide participants with ideas how to use my project in the classroom to accomplish the above goals.

Goal B: To receive feedback as to how the class experience and application could be improved along with addressing questions that participants might have, such as challenges, revelations, and learning moments.

Goal C: To facilitate idea sharing among conference participants.

### **Activity Overview**

I initially designed the project for a class of 20 students with the intent to engage the audience with hands-on learning and application of management functions-related material. Over the last couple of semesters, however, I have realized that 1) the activity can be successfully executed in class sizes ranging anywhere from 10 to 40 students and 2) in addition to management skills topics, the game successfully facilitates the learning of a variety of OB topics (e.g., leadership, teamwork, communication, decision-making). I have discovered that the ideal class size ranges between 16 and 35 students, divided into 4 to 7 teams of 4-5 students per team.

The proposed project is applicable for face-to-face classrooms and is suitable for both, homogenous and mixed-culture groups at undergraduate and traditional MBA levels. I believe that the project presented in this session, could successfully be used in Management Skills, Organizational Behavior, Introduction to Human Resources/Management, Organizational Theory, and Organization Development classes.

At the very first day of the semester, I collect data on students' dietary restrictions. I do so at that time with the assumption that all students attend the first day of class. If students are added later, I make sure to inquire about their dietary restrictions.

Approximately half way into the semester, I form the teams and introduce the project. I also distribute to each student a written description of the project (Appendix A) along with the requirements for the team presentation (Appendix B). I also commit to students to bring table cloth, plastic utensils, paper plates, napkins, cups, and non-alcoholic drinks, such as water, diet and regular carbonated drinks. I also inform students that each member's contributions for both, the cooking and the presentations, will be assessed by the other team members and as such, it is

of critical importance to contribute and not socially loaf. This introduction takes about 10-15 minutes.

For the weeks to follow, students work on their own with regard to researching recipes that contain specific ingredients, planning and delegating jobs, shopping, cooking, and presenting their dish. In my role as an instructor, I inquire about their progress on regular intervals, and address issues, should they occur.

On the day of the presentation, I collect students' peer evaluations, a copy of their presentation, as well as their receipts. I then invite each team to present their project and finalize the meeting with inviting the class to eat the dishes. Alternatively, instructors who wish to use this project, could invite students to eat first, present last. Depending on the class size, and ultimately the number of teams, instructors can limit the timing for the presentations to 10-15 minutes per team.

### **MOBTS Session Description**

My presentation will be covered in a 45-minute session as follows:

<i>Introduction (purpose of session and set up):</i>	5 minutes
<i>Paper Presentation:</i>	20 minutes
<i>Dialogue:</i>	
Conference participants share their impressions of the activity (Goal A)	5 minutes
Conference participants suggest improvements (Goal B)	5 minutes
Participants share their experiences with similar activities (Goal C)	10 minutes

### Unique Contribution

This presentation has not been considered for publication elsewhere. However, a brief mention of the activity has been done during a conference meeting in Maynooth, Ireland. With this submission, I present more detail about the project, its execution, and caveats.

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## Appendix A: Mixing it Up Project Description

This assignment will require students to **prepare a dish** with a given list of ingredients **and make a presentation on the dish**. The assignment is to be done in teams of four to five students.

### **FOLLOWING IS A DETAILED LIST OF INGREDIENTS AND HOW TO CHOOSE THEM**

Conditions to cook a great dish require using, or creating, a great recipe. You can choose to make a traditional dish or create your own dish in a creative way, using the following ingredients:

#### **Red color ingredients (choose at least 2)**

Tomatoes, red peppers, red onions, radicchio, eggplant, and red cabbage  
Strawberries, cherries, watermelon, red grapes, red apples, pomegranate, raspberries.

#### **Green color ingredients (choose at least 2)**

Green salad, zucchini, cucumber, spinach, broccoli, green onion, green pepper, and peas  
Limes, green apples, kiwi, green pears, green grapes.

#### **White and Yellow color ingredients (choose at least 1)**

Potatoes, pasta, rice, lentils, quinoa, beans, tortillas  
Mango, pineapple, yellow apples.

**Neutral ingredients** – you do not have to purchase these with your budget. These ingredients are to be “borrowed” from your own pantry in small quantities.

Oil, butter, salt, pepper, garlic, flour, water, baking powder, vinegar, mayo, mustard, or other sauces.

**IF YOU WANT TO USE AN INGREDIENT THAT IS NOT ON THIS LIST, PLEASE,  
RUN IT BY YOUR PROFESSOR FIRST!**

The above mentioned ingredients will be your resources for this assignment, BUT keep in mind that some people have allergies and dietary restrictions and as such, the following foods/ingredients MUST be EXCLUDED:

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## **BUDGET**

Each member on the team **donates \$10**  
Your dish has to feed at least 5 guests

*Bring your receipt(s) please*

## **YOUR TASKS**

Your team will be responsible for:

### **1. Dish Planning**

- What dish will you produce?
- How will you choose your ingredients?
- How will you use your resources/money?
- Which problems might your group face in the process of creating this plan?

The instructor will evaluate your plan on originality and creative use of available resources.

### **2. Preparation of the dish**

Your team is to prepare and cook the dish and bring it to class to share with classmates and the professor.

### **3. Project Reflection**

Remember, as you tackle the assignment, to take notes of your in-group working process and steps. This Process Reflection should consider the following points:

- What blocks did your team encounter as you worked on your cooking plan?
- Which techniques did your team find most useful for breaking through such blocks?
- What major kind of stressors did you face in doing this assignment?
- Did you adopt any particular strategies, in order to eliminate or reduce the impact of these stressors?
- In your opinion, what worked well and what did not work well for you? What might work better if ...?

**Appendix B: Power Point Presentation Details**  
***Bring a hard copy to class for your instructor please***

***Cover (1 slide)***

- Title of the *Recipe*
- Name of Your Team
- Names of team members

***Description of the team (2 slides)***

This section includes:

- a brief description **of each member** of the team: background, past experiences (professional and/or social), fun facts, etc.;
- a picture of each member.

***Your Product (2 slides)***

- Describe the main activities carried out by your team and the outcome you produced.
- You know that creativity has four dimensions. Please, describe which type of creativity you have adopted for achieving your goal (i.e, the choice of recipe and ingredients and how you made these decisions).

***Your plan and strategy (2-4 slides)***

Describe the initial plan and strategy that were adopted by your team, in order to reach the objective (including a discussion of the results and budget). Specifically:

- What dish will you produce?
- How will you choose your ingredients?
- How will you use your resources/money?
- Which problems might your team face in the process of creating this plan?

***Your organizing steps, including team members' skills and responsibilities, actual budget, structure, etc. (2-4 slides)***

***Your leading elements (2-4 slides)***

- How did you motivate each other?
- Who was the team leader (if any) and how did they behave? What did you learn as a team?
- What were your strengths as a team?
- What were the occasions when your team struggled, and
- Assess your overall team dynamics.

***Your controlling elements (2-4 slides)***

- Were there any blocks/issues that inhibited you from being effective?
- Please, describe the blocks you experienced and the strategies for overcoming them. Include a discussion of motivational strategies that were used.
- Which techniques did your team find most useful for breaking through such blocks?

- What major kind of stressors did you face in doing this assignment?
- Did you adopt any particular strategies, in order to eliminate or reduce the impact of these stressors?
- In your opinion, what worked well and what did not work well for you?
- What might work better if... ?

***What were each team member's eye-opening moments? (2-4 slides)***

- Each team member should say what were their most eye-opening, surprising, or impactful moments and why.
- How can the lessons from these moments be used in the future?

In your presentation, you are advised and encouraged to use pictures, stories and beyond to bring your experience and answers to the above questions to life.

Your presentations should be informative, creative, educational, and inspiring. Please, provide ONE copy of your presentation online (ONE TEAM MEMBER SHOULD UPLOAD ON CANVAS THE PRESENTATION) at the start of the class. You should provide a one page professional handout to the professor, summarizing the key learning points/concepts in the presentation and the answers to the above questions.

The presentation should last no more than 7 minutes, followed by a 3 minute Q&A session. Limited team preparation time will be allowed during class time, thus, come PREPARED!

***PROJECT GRADING***

- A. \_\_\_\_\_ /5 **Project Overview**
- B. \_\_\_\_\_ /5 **Use of theory** (made good use of theories and models discussed in class)
- C. \_\_\_\_\_ /8 **Addressed all planning questions**
- D. \_\_\_\_\_ /8 **Addressed all organizing questions** (including meeting the budget)
- E. \_\_\_\_\_ /8 **Addressed all leading questions**
- F. \_\_\_\_\_ /8 **Addressed all controlling questions**
- G. \_\_\_\_\_ /6 **Depth & Effort** (including quality of answers)
- H. \_\_\_\_\_ /12 **AHA moments and lessons**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Team Score (out of 60)**

**Depending on your peer evaluation, each member may get a different team score!**

***POWER POINT PRESENTATION GRADING***

- A. \_\_\_\_\_ /**4** **Smoothness of transitions** between speakers (in the initial presentation as well as during)
- B. \_\_\_\_\_ /**6** **Use of evidence** (made good use of facts, figures, information, and logic)
- C. \_\_\_\_\_ /**2** **Professionalism of the presentation** (dress code; tone)
- D. \_\_\_\_\_ /**4** **Visual aids** (clear, legible, and well-organized)
- E. \_\_\_\_\_ /**2** **Teamwork** (all members presented their share; no dominant speaker/presenter)
- F. \_\_\_\_\_ /**2** **Interaction** (engaging with the audience)
- G. \_\_\_\_\_ /**5** **Quality of answers** (posed by the audience and to the questions above)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Team Score (out of 25)**

**Depending on your peer evaluation, each member may get a different team score!**



