



How to win Management MasterChef

The 10 cooking
processes every
aspiring manager
needs to master

“A recipe is only a theme, which
an intelligent cook can play each
time with a variation.”

Madam Benoit

The scenario

We have been asked to appear on the BBC programme MasterChef. Because we are competitive we are determined to win. The only problem is that we've never cooked in our life.

What do we do?

We could read every recipe in every cook book. Or we could begin to experiment by trial and error by preparing every conceivable permutation of dish. A tough way to get ready for MasterChef. And there isn't enough time; the competition begins in four weeks.

A smarter strategy might be to pinpoint the key cooking processes that are fundamental to 90% of the meals we may be asked to cook. Here we identify the core cooking methods that will help us prepare whatever the show throws at us.

What's the management equivalent?



We asked over 300 professionals in learning and development, talent management and executive coaching for their views.

We received a flood of responses, over 280 suggested “management cooking processes”. After removing overlap, we've outlined the ten most frequently mentioned processes.

The aim is to find ways to accelerate the management development process to equip emerging managers for the challenges they face. Of course experience matters. The goal is to find ways of structuring these experiences - the content and sequence - to optimise the learning and speed up the development of the Four Cs of leadership: capability, character, credibility and career management.

“*Recipe: a series of step-by-step instructions for preparing ingredients you forgot to buy, in utensils you don't own, to make a dish the dog won't eat.*”

Unknown

Microwave management and key cooking processes

We've had a few years now of "microwave management". The manager pops in the prepared meal. Presses the timer. And others have to eat what comes out.

It's quick but it's also nasty. This isn't even management by cook book. It's management by pre-packaged formula.

A better strategy might be to master a few key processes, processes that open up flexibility and versatility rather than rely on a few packs that are opened up and heated quickly.

As in cooking, a key management process:

- incorporates an **understanding of ingredients and mastery of technique**. This is management as the insight into the critical factors that explain why some things work and some things don't, rather than the unthinking application of the recipe
- **simplifies and streamlines** the complexity of the hundreds of cooking permutations. As a manager we can reach for the "how to cook-book" to face the challenges of each and every situation we will face. Or we can understand the fundamental sequence of activities that produce consistently successful results
- has **high transferability** that can be applied across a range of different foods and dishes. Seeing each and every dish as a new challenge is a demanding way to cook. The trick is to apply a few powerful techniques to generate new solutions that meet the problem in a fresh and authentic way



“ Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in fruit salad. ”

Peter Kay

Ten management cooking processes

In finalising a set of fundamental processes from the survey responses we selected:

- discrete activities that represent **genuinely different challenges**, not the variation of the same management technique
- tasks which incorporate **different levels of learning**: about ourselves, about others, the role of management and nature of organisational life
- activities that are **stretching and challenging, but still do-able**. The ten processes reflect increasing complexity and difficulty (the equivalent progression from the “easy” task of boiling an egg to the more demanding chocolate soufflé).



The ten management cooking processes:

1. **Look within to work out what it's all about**
2. **Identify a talented team member and develop them**
3. **Improve performance by seeing the customer's world**
4. **Restructure your work group to create a new team**
5. **Have a tough conversation with a difficult employee**
6. **Communicate a mix of good and bad news**
7. **Resolve a problem with another work area**
8. **Take on a task outside our experience and expertise**
9. **Step back from a high risk project to allow others to get on with**
10. **Write a “strategy paper” that front line staff understand**

1. Look within to work out what it's all about

If we cannot manage ourselves, our time, energy and emotions, it is questionable if we can manage very much else.

This cooking process begins with ourselves - who we are, what we can do and what value we can add to others. It also starts with a willingness to understand the role of progressive management practice to make a positive difference with our colleagues and improve organisational productivity.

The motivation to manage of course varies from individual to individual. However if the key drivers are *only* status or financial reward we may struggle with the challenges of managing. This process asks us to define what it means to succeed as a manager.



Why this process matters

- It asks us to think deeply about our own values and motivations to manage. If management has to balance “me” with “we” we should first begin with “we” and ask the question “why would anyone want to be managed by me?” We might learn more about “me”
- It requires honesty about our starting point, the strengths we possess and any gaps in our repertoire of skills
- We have to think through what it means to manage with excellence. This is about our level of aspiration. Is “good enough” sufficient to avoid trouble? Or do we want to achieve pride and fulfilment through a sustainable impact
- It establishes a discipline of regular review and reflection to track our progress and impact to identify how to move from apprentice to mastery

“Cooking is an art and patience a virtue... Careful shopping, fresh ingredients and an unhurried approach are nearly all you need. There is one more thing - love.”

Keith Floyd

2. Identify a talented team member and develop them

This is the management cooking process in which we come to recognise that our productivity will be optimised when we identify our key people and put in place measures to improve their current effectiveness and support their longer-term progression.

We can't ignore the C Players (the poor performers) but we shouldn't allow them to distort our management priorities. When we focus on our best people, rather than take them for granted, we find ways to build on their strengths and raise the bar for everyone (including ourselves).

Why this process matters

- We improve our people judgement skills to recognise who really is contributing (and why) and who isn't (and why)
- We learn about the development process and how to move capability into advanced levels of proficiency
- We are forced to raise our own game as we respond to those top performers who push for greater responsibility and autonomy
- We strengthen our expertise in core people management skills, from recruitment and induction to performance management and reward, and career development and succession planning



“For someone who's never spent an hour in a professional kitchen, you impressed me. And behind that, you touched my heart. Keep smiling.”

Gordon Ramsay

3. Improve performance by seeing the customer's world

Business life being what it is we can't stand still. Our competitors keep innovating and improving implementation to narrow our strategic space.

We can begin a performance programme with our colleagues in Head Office. Or we can start the process by finding out what our customers expect, what they like and what they don't like to set an agenda for change and improvement.

This process works backwards, seeing life through the customer's eyes rather than start from where we are and our own expectations of what needs to change.

Why this process matters

- We remind ourselves of the importance of the customer and that their reality may be very different to our world
- We prioritise activity around what genuinely matters and will make a business difference not remain caught up in the wrangles of internal project management methodologies
- We learn the impact of systems and processes across different functions to drive sustainable performance gains
- It develops our power of creativity and innovation to accelerate performance improvement



“*The secret of a successful chef is to put yourself in the customer's position. By that I mean thinking about what they want.*”

Gordon Ramsay

4. Restructure your work group to create a new team

In this process we look at the challenges we face and ask how best to organise and coordinate activity to optimise overall productivity. It's tempting to stick with a well-established team in which every individual knows their exact role and coordinates their efforts smoothly and efficiently.

But of course the business changes. No doubt restructuring is troublesome in the short term with the potential for uncertainty and disruption. However rethinking does have the advantage of breaking down any complacency and lethargy that may be emerging within the work group.

It also provides the opportunity to rethink the range of expertise and skill sets across the work group to identify better ways of deploying and organising their talents.

Why this process matters

- It forces us to think of different options in team organisation and the dynamics that underpin successful teams
- We gain an insight into individual differences and the importance of matching strengths to role requirements
- We understand the hazards of change and what needs to be done to go from A to Z
- We learn the importance of employment law in management decision making and how to avoid the hazards of legal blunders



“Getting into the habit of switching a timer on, will I promise, save you from any number of kitchen disasters.”

Delia Smith

5. Have a tough conversation with a difficult employee

It's not nice and it's not easy. But until we identify and deal with the employee who is:

- coasting along and undermining the motivation of colleagues
- displaying bad behaviour to undermine the values of the work group
- making the kind of comments that are demeaning or discriminatory
- displaying a lack of respect for customers and suppliers

we run the risk of damaging our personal credibility and weakening the team's reputation with other work areas.

It's time to talk and have a difficult conversation.



Why this process matters

- Our willingness to face and resolve conflict situations is reinforced
- We learn the importance of empathy to see the issues through another's perspective and identify the factors that can cause bad behaviour and under-performance
- We begin to learn what can change easily, what only with much difficulty and what will probably never change about people
- We enhance our fact finding and problem solving to negotiate a solution and a practical way forward
- It improves the way we think about objectives and how to link them to personal development

“Heat is the common ingredient to all cooking processes.”

Alton Brown

6. Communicate a mix of good and bad news

In this scenario, events have moved on and the business is changing. As part of this change, a new strategy and priorities needs to be implemented. And as part of this process there will be some winners and losers.

Organisational surveys consistently highlight the problem of communication. Employees either feel overwhelmed and confused by the onslaught of “new stuff”, or completely in the dark and unsure what is happening.

If we can't communicate we can't manage. This isn't simply the announcement of success to celebrate, it is also tough messages of difficulties and problems.

If we can we may have mastered a key management process.

Why this process is key

- We learn the importance of integrity and trust when we have to communicate difficult organisational messages.
- We find out that we mean and say may be heard and understood very differently. Here we have to rethink our communication tactics (meetings, briefings etc)
- We discover that listening may be the most important element in effective communication
- We recognise that we shouldn't make commitments today that we can't meet tomorrow
- We improve our presentational skills - the content and style - to engage authentically with others



“ *And I like asking questions, to keep learning; people with big egos might not want to look unsure.* ”

Heston Blumenthal

7. Resolve a problem with another work area

Another department isn't responding to our requests for support. Their lack of responsiveness is now creating problems for our own work area.

We can either "grin and bear it", finding work-arounds to manage the problem. Or we can decide to resolve the situation.

Problems within the work area for which we have responsibility are straightforward. We know what to do and we have the power to change things.

Problems with other work areas highlight issues we can't fully control, or at least not with hierarchical authority. We have to apply a different set of tactics.

Why this process matters

- We build proficiency in the art of listening
- We gain an insight into the political dynamic, and the reality that: there is more to organisational life than formal policies, organisation charts and work flows
- We improve our effectiveness in influence and negotiation when we have to persuade and sell rather than order and tell
- We stand back to see our work area as part of a bigger picture and move from silo thinking to identify the inter-connections of organisational processes and outcomes



“ Team three will be handling fish! Team four: roasted items! Team five: grill! Team six: sauces! Get to your stations, let's go, go, go! ”

Rémy in Ratatouille

8. Take on a task that is outside our experience and expertise

It's slightly scary. We've been asked to take on a task that is outside our comfort zone.

It might be good advice to stay within what Warren Buffett calls the "circle of competence" to avoid those projects that may expose our weaknesses. But it's unlikely our management cooking skills will progress by sticking to familiar basics.



Why this process matters

- When we have to accept we don't know it all and have to rely on others' expertise and skill, our ego takes a lesson in humility
- We discover the power of good questioning technique and critical thinking to know what and how to ask and how to evaluate the answers
- We see the world through a different lens to recognise our perspective is not the only one. Here we discover our current approach is not the best one and we need to extend our horizons to incorporate new ideas
- If we succeed we build our confidence and courage to cope with future uncertainty and ambiguity; if we fail we've tested our limits and learn something of our strengths and limitations

“Cooking is a subject you can never know enough about. There is always something new to discover.”

Bobby Flay

9. Step back from a high risk project to allow others to get on with it

We've been asked to take on a high profile assignment. But our time is committed to other activities, and despite the risks, we know we will have to delegate the task to others.

This process is key to understanding the complexities of accountability, responsibility and delegation. We can simply hand over the project, keeping our fingers crossed that all will be well, or position ourselves to find a scapegoat in the event of failure.

Or we can implement the measures that optimise the odds of a positive outcome for everyone.

Why this process matters

- We are reminded of the importance of clarity of overall purpose and defining the outcomes of success
- We build a better understanding of the process of delegation, the what and how of assigning work and tracking activity, progress and impact
- It sensitises us to the idea that we personally don't have to do everything to manage, and often it's better to stand back
- We build our confidence in facing ambiguity, uncertainty and risk



“Cooking requires confident guesswork and improvisation - experimentation and substitution, dealing with failure and uncertainty in a creative way.”

Paul Theroux

10. Write a “strategy paper” that front line staff understand

Here the management challenge isn't to formulate a new strategy for the organisation. It is to summarise on one page, in a simple and direct way, the organisational big picture.

This is the process of analysing the organisation's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats within the market-place - from competitors and customers.

A tough challenge but an important process to progress from managing a discrete activity to understanding the realities of strategic decision making.

Why this process matters

- We shift perspective from the pressures and priorities of our immediate work area to think about overall business performance and success
- It requires us to conduct fact-finding research and draw on the insights of others from different functions
- It forces us to look outside the organisation and identify how market-place dynamics may be shifting
- We undergo a crash course in financial analysis to identify if the business model will make or lose money in future
- It enhances our written skills to express our analysis in a clear and understandable way that can be explained to anyone



“*In the abstract art of cooking, ingredients trump appliances, passion supersedes expertise, creativity triumphs over technique, spontaneity inspires invention.*”

Bob Blumer

Conclusions

“ *Once you understand the foundations of cooking - whatever kind you like - you really don't need a cookbook anymore.* ”

Thomas Keller

Analogies of course break down. Cooking isn't management and management isn't cooking. But we can learn from mastery in any field and how an understanding of process and the willingness to practice accelerates learning.

If we're competing in MasterChef we could construct a listing of key skills and traits based on what great chefs do and how they operate. (Although any competency model that manages to accommodate Gordon Ramsay, Nigella Lawson, Gary Rhodes, Delia Smith, Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater pulls off quite a trick). We could then design a training programme to develop these skills and qualities.

Helpful though that strategy may be, we may have missed something important. Great chefs become great chefs through the mastery of process, not by working through a behavioural checklist.

So we may need to rethink our frameworks of management and leadership success to focus on the key processes that integrate skill, practice and experience to develop our current and emerging managers.

With a focus on management process, and the “ingredients and techniques” that underpin proficiency, we may develop greater versatility and flexibility within our managers.



About Us

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting works with a broad portfolio of clients – in the UK and internationally - in the design and implementation of online services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; online leadership tool kits, 360° feedback; performance management and talent and succession management.

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- help trouble-shoot the messy organisational problems to see the key issues, identify options and put in place actionable plans that make progress.
- cut to the chase to focus on the distinctive challenges of our clients. We enjoy the innovation that results from our clients with ideas and we help translate them into practical applications.
- draw on an extensive research base, library of resource and range of tool kits, and up-to-date thinking to help design and implement practical solutions quickly.

