

*The Wall Street Journal* asked Katzenbach Partners for some insight into carrying off a Thanksgiving meal.

**Getting Thanksgiving Right**

by Niko Canner and Amy Eisner

Thanksgiving comes every year, but it's always an exception, a special event. Business executives planning for occasions such as a post-merger integration or the annual strategic planning process recognize that there's no ordinary way to handle an infrequent challenge, even one that comes every year. Episodic events like these also come with the high-pressure combination of outsized expectations and limited room for experiment. There's little opportunity for the kind of incremental, data-driven performance improvements that businesses have gotten so good at. Turkey is affordable enough, but you probably don't want to roast one every week and track the results against each variation. You might end up with the perfect roast, but no one in your household would have much appetite for it on Thanksgiving Day. You can't make a science out of a holiday, but you can build a working routine, one that will allow you to think clearly, delegate and involve people appropriately, manage the risks, and give your guests a warm welcome.

Managing this challenge will require a coherent approach that integrates strategy (what kind of Thanksgiving), organization (who does what), and disciplined execution (something which can happen once the organization is aligned around a clear strategy). There is plenty of advice available online (and in the supermarket checkout line) about the step-by-step tactics and timing for getting Thanksgiving dinner on the table. You don't need a management consulting firm to give you prepackaged advice. We'll focus instead on how you can incorporate a handful of powerful techniques that set successful business executives apart. And the most important of these comes before you even begin.

**Establish your strategic intent**

Before you start the project, you need to define it. Never accept a management challenge at face value – if you don't ask enough questions, you may solve the wrong problem. At Katzenbach Partners, we reach out broadly within organizations to find out what people envision as the ideal outcome of the project, as well as what they see as the barriers that have prevented it from being solved before. Ask yourself what Thanksgiving is really about for you and your guests. If family members mostly care about having a relaxed good time, bonding over football or a 1000-piece puzzle, then food and décor may not matter very much, so skip the flowers and plan to set out a spread that people can eat anytime. On the other hand, if your family enjoys throwing a good party, and the fine details are an expression of love, then you might figure out who the wine expert is and have that person bring the wine, because it's not just a beverage, it's a topic of conversation and a source of shared pleasure. If the value proposition for each of your stakeholders isn't crystal clear, ask them directly, or take a few minutes to reminisce with them about previous years and listen carefully to what they have to say. And don't be afraid to ask yourself this fundamental question: do you have a Thanksgiving strategy that basically works, one that makes people happy, or do you need systemic change? It is always easier for a leader to take charge of executing a game plan within the context of an inherited tradition, but sometimes the system is broken and an effective CEO has to become a change agent on a far broader scale, as Pfizer Chairman Hank McKinnell has with his recent book *A Call to Action: Taking Back Healthcare For Future Generations*, which calls for a shift in the healthcare debate from a narrow focus on the cost of disease to the broad range of actions we can take to sustain health. Whether you need to come up with a new approach to Thanksgiving now that the family has tripled in size or simply carry on your grandmother's traditions, your aspirations for this Thanksgiving should be derived from an understanding of the real value of the undertaking for the people involved.

Once your strategic intent is clear, you'll be able to focus on what matters most every day.

## **Saturday**

Great project managers who are one giant step away from the finish line pause and plan for just long enough to make themselves uncomfortable about the time that is slipping away, and you should be no exception. Take a deep breath. Good management is always a stretch, and good consultants always push an executive to go beyond what he or she initially feels ready to do. As we extrapolate from what we see with our clients to your challenge as a home chef, we urge you to stretch beyond your comfort zone in two ways today:

**Create meaningful leadership roles around you.** Anyone who has ever tried to make a manufacturing plant more efficient is used to the idea of operational bottlenecks. At Thanksgiving all the kitchen appliances can become operational bottlenecks, and you may already be thinking about how to get the oven timing right and whether you can borrow refrigerator space from a neighbor. But what managers often fail to see is human resource bottlenecks. In this case, that means you. It is rare in business to have one person be the project manager, lead designer and artisan-in-chief all in one, but many Thanksgiving home chefs are just that. Which means that any hour of work you can give to someone else, even someone who might do it a little less efficiently – or, for any but the critical core tasks, a little less well – than you would, is an hour that you have freed up to concentrate on the things that will make the greatest difference to your holiday. Good managers don't delegate piecemeal; they create coherent, meaningful roles that bundle together many tasks. Could your spouse, for instance, become "front of the house" manager and not only take charge of greeting guests and making them feel at home on the day itself, but also manage all the details of the setting the guests will experience – from vacuuming to flowers to making room in the coat closet? Or perhaps your fifteen year-old daughter could own what in restaurant tradition is referred to as the "staff meal," keeping the family well-fed during a demanding week of holiday preparations and enabling you to stay focused on Thursday's dinner. You might even get her a copy of David Waltuck's lovely book *Staff Meals from Chanterelle* as a thank-you.

**Be savvy about sourcing and outsourcing.** In business, as in the kitchen, often too little creativity is applied to the act of buying. Spend a little planning time on Saturday thinking about where a small expenditure can add a grace note to the meal or make your life easier. Even fifteen minutes of true brainstorming time can release a creative torrent if you follow the rules of design firm IDEO and "go for quantity" of ideas without fear of being silly. Think about going beyond the ordinary in ways that not only improve the quality of the meal but also create a story that reinforces for your guests the special quality of the occasion. Consider, for instance, moving beyond the traditional broad-breasted white turkey to a heritage turkey like the Jersey Bluff or the Narragansett (a helpful list of farmers is provided by Slow Foods USA on their website [www.slowfoodsusa.org](http://www.slowfoodsusa.org)). Even if you don't ordinarily use a housekeeper, this week may be a time when you want some outside help with chores. Or, perhaps rather than beg your adolescent son to help, you could convince him and his friends to form a posse to do household chores for three or four Thanksgiving-focused moms and dads, with the proceeds going to disaster relief in Pakistan and the whole story maybe even evolving into the centerpiece of the college applications essay you've been meaning to help him with. There's no need to feel ashamed to outsource even something that feels as integral as menu design. When Burger King gave Crispin Porter + Bogusky the freedom to hatch Subservient Chicken, they knew that sometimes an inspired other mind can express our true nature better than we can. Have fun generating the ideas, and only then reflect on which ones are feasible and worthwhile. Make sure that any new products or services you pursue make sense as brand extensions. That is, if you're adding a new item to the

menu or a new activity to the day, it should draw on the same values and affinities as the original brand. Not every family tradition can encompass an after-dinner scavenger hunt; a well-chosen CD may be more consistent with your group's signature nap.

Saturday is about putting things in place – having all the recipes and shopping lists, knowing who will do what and when, sharpening your knives (never, ever underestimate the difference this will make). If at the end of the day you feel more energized and ready for the four big days before the day itself, you will know that you are on track.

### **Sunday**

Now that you've created leadership roles for other people and outsourced a bunch of shopping and services, you may actually feel like you have more, not less, to do. You're going to need to stay on top of the planning, bring your problem-solving skills to the things that don't go as planned, and provide a steady current of energy, motivation, and foresight (not to mention the Indian-spiced nuts you refused to hand off). That's okay: these are mostly the right kinds of responsibilities. You're going to need to do a little of everything, especially today – your last day before the work week begins. But if you try to respond to everything the minute it comes up, you're going to wear yourself out, and everyone around you will feel it. Time management and leadership will be essential, so here are two stretch goals for the day:

**Be disciplined about time management.** The purpose of scheduling is not to fill the calendar with a cacophony of tasks, but to open up spaces in which meaningful work can take place. The first step, according to organization expert Julie Morgenstern, author of *Time Management from the Inside Out*, is to group the activities you'll be involved in into a few larger themes, such as Planning, Managing People, Provisioning (shopping and cooking), Home (the physical setting), and Guest Experience (the event itself). If you'd rather define the work in another way, you might use a decision tree to structure your thinking about what needs to be done, and then see what the main branches are. Morgenstern emphasizes that by thinking of tasks in terms of the bigger ideas they belong to, "you'll increase your pleasure in planning the event, and bring a higher level of self to each thing you do." You'll also be in a better position to assess the weight and balance of the workload, which is where Morgenstern's "Four D's" come into play: delete, delay, delegate, and diminish. You've already delegated substantive roles to others and diminished the work through outsourcing, but are there still tasks which are just too much of a diversion and can be delayed until next year or deleted entirely? Cutting back doesn't make you less involved, it allows you to be more involved. If you scrap the everything-from-scratch theme and hand off the Home department, you might be able to immerse yourself in the Guest Experience for an entire evening. If a shopping item pops up, don't drop what you're doing and run to the store, just put it on the list, because you already know when you're going to focus on provisions. This method will help you preserve time every day for planning and for people, so that you can keep yourself and everyone else balanced.

**Commit to one change in your leadership style.** By mid-afternoon, you can hear running water, a chopping knife, and the vacuum cleaner, and you know operations are underway. Over dinner, ask your stakeholders to help you with this: what's the one behavior you could change that would make the most difference to them? Our colleagues at our sister firm Marshall Goldsmith Partners have taught us that even a single change can make a large difference in effectiveness. Kathy Dockry is coaching a senior executive who decided, based on feedback from colleagues, to work on becoming more collaborative in his interactions. Within three months his colleagues have begun to notice that he shares information more freely, asks for input before making important decisions, listens to their suggestions, and sometimes even changes his mind. But the first person to notice the change was his colleague-

age daughter, who told him that he seemed to be gentler, happier, more patient, and a better listener. Suppose you tend to snap at people when you're under stress. You can't change that overnight, but you could probably commit to giving the family some quiet time on Thursday morning before they start getting ordered around. When your family knows you're not only doing your best, but concretely trying to change what your best means for them, they'll be willing to go the extra mile too. The idea isn't to set up a grand last-minute ambition, but to actually adopt a behavior that everyone knows is a good idea. Follow-through is precious.

## **Monday**

As the truncated work week begins, you probably have at most a few hours to devote to Thanksgiving preparations. Even if you have time for nothing else, make sure to honor the times you've set aside for planning and managing people. During your planning session and in your conversations, keep the big picture in mind and try to identify potential problems. Will events unfold as you intend, or are there underlying forces that will steer things in a different direction? Do the people who have taken on contributing and leadership roles have everything they need to follow through? While you're troubleshooting, here are your stretch goals for the day:

**Leverage the formal and informal organization.** When it comes to bringing food and helping out in the kitchen, some of your guests are probably prepared to take on explicit responsibilities. But the best leaders also mobilize the informal organization: the invisible connections that control how things really get done. Thinking about the informal organization helps leaders to understand the key differences between how things work and how they want them to work – and to do something about it. If your strategic goal for this Thanksgiving is for family members to have the kind of long, interesting, inclusive conversations that you used to have when these gatherings were smaller and your grandfather cast an authoritative shadow at the head of the table, then you need to think carefully about who can help to make that happen. Does one of your little cousins have a way of asking questions that really gets conversation going? Does your father-in-law have a habit of stacking dishes in a way that signals that the meal – and the conversation – is over? Maybe your cousin can think up something to ask your father-in-law towards the end of the meal.

**Invest in organizational capability.** Sometimes a simple idea can pay long-term dividends. If you rotate who brings what from year to year so that the best cooks are introducing new dishes and passing along their knowledge, this could lead to more innovative and higher-quality holiday meals. At the same time, because individuals would develop broader and deeper capabilities, you would be increasing the flexibility and stability of your holiday planning process. Consider asking this year's cooks to bring copies of their recipes with them to hand off. (If one particular recipe is a closely held secret, the ritual of investing the next office-holder with the key becomes all the more special.)

## **Tuesday**

At this point, you're immersed in pre-Thanksgiving operations, but it's important to come up for air and think through the customer (guest) experience. Start at the beginning. Take the time to personally invite those friends-of-friends you've agreed to host. Sanity-check the MapQuest directions to your home. And for today's stretch goal, contemplate the chemistry involved when everyone converges, and see if you can set the conditions for bonds to form – preferably without explosions.

**Activate the social network.** When organizations are working to become more flexible and responsive, we sometimes use a technique called social network analysis to make the invisible connections among people visible. This technique can be useful in coming up with a seating plan, whether you're figuring out who has to eat in the kitchen due to

space constraints or how to arrange everyone around the banquet table. Think about the group that's coming. If everyone knows each other, and especially if they are all family members, then you might map out the least volatile connections. Don't put Andre and Kathy together if they'll just get into a heated political argument and alienate Vashti (unless those arguments are the highlight of their day, in which case it's Vashti you'll have to relocate). On the other hand, if your group consists of two dozen friends, your goal may not be to avoid conflict, but to ensure that good conversation and a sense of connection emerge. There may be five people who know everyone in the group and three who know only one other person in the group. In this case, you might map out the social network in terms of hubs and outliers. The social hubs are individuals with a disproportionate number of links to other people, individuals whom others go to for information, advice and motivation. The outliers know fewer people and can easily feel isolated. As you arrange the seating, disperse both the social hubs and the outliers among the other guests. Avoid dropping the outliers into a nexus of people (alumni, physicians, management consultants) with too much in common. And consider abolishing the kids table. Inclusion in the informal network of an organization is an important way to educate new members of a group about the shared values, norms and processes of an organization. If the kids want to slip away together, they will; you'll still have done your part for familial succession planning.

### **Wednesday**

Today the momentum builds in earnest. Some of your guests are already filling pots, suitcases, or gas tanks in preparation. You probably have plenty of cooking, cleaning and calling left to do, but even if you find yourself with a couple of hours to spare, don't fall into the trap of adding back extras that you dropped from the list – you have something better to do than rake the leaves or bake an extra dessert. Your stretch goal for today is all about other people.

**Be a pride-builder.** Think about the best Thanksgivings you've been a part of. How did your aunt make everyone feel welcome, and why did you feel motivated to make not one but three pies, when you had never baked before? Did she have a knack for making you feel proud of your family's traditions and your contributions to them? In every successful operation, there are a few key people we call pride-builders, who produce exceptional results by producing exceptional motivation in the people around them, and who are able to sustain that motivation because it isn't driven by greed or fear, but by a sense of pride. Jon Katzenbach describes the motivational power of pride in his book *Why Pride Matters More Than Money*, and our clients have used pride as a technique to boost employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and sales. Come to think of it, the institution of Thanksgiving itself is an exercise in pride-building, designed to engage people in recognizing what's going well, even in difficult times, and where that success originates. In that sense, pride and humility go hand in hand. Pride-builders understand that the way they approach the day to day details of their job has an impact on the lives of those around them. That doesn't just mean saying thank you. It means anticipating success, building a sense of anticipation in others, and helping them to shine. Starbucks builds pride by giving employees room to express themselves—for example, through Avant-Grande, a series of exhibits that brought art by Starbucks baristas to galleries and museums in the cities where those baristas worked. When you know that the person filling your coffee cup also has deeper talents and involvements, and she knows that you know it, the interaction becomes more fulfilling for both of you. Think about what you can do to build pride and anticipation in those around you. If your spouse has agreed to welcome the guests, make yourself available as a sounding board for ideas, verbally imagine what a difference that welcome will make, and then don't get in the way, even if

that means the ghoulish laughter machine gets hooked up again or the drinks are made with tarragon.

### **Thursday**

Today is the day everything comes together. You already know what you need to do: keep your strategic and leadership goals in mind, be as responsive and inspiring as possible, continue to delegate, hang on to your sense of humor, and enjoy yourself. But do you have an approach that will allow you to actually carry that off?

**See everything, do something.** In a recent essay, Blue Hill chef Dan Barber described his first night cooking under Daniel Bouley. “Around him was an orbit of madness,” Barber recalled – dozens of cooks in motion, the expeditor shouting orders – but Bouley was calm and alert to every detail, and even took the time to put Barber in a headlock for a little tête-à-tête, telling him to slow down and talk to the mackerel in the pan. A master chef needs the peripheral vision of a field commander in battle to watch everything at once and manage specifics at the same time. Once your guests arrive, you’re not really going to be able to enter the planning zone as if it were a separate space. If you’ve given people meaningful leadership roles, though, you’ll only be called in to problem-solve, make a few judgment calls, and guide people in doing what they already understand they need to do. If you operate this way, others will even step up to handle the inevitable surprises. When your mother peeks in the oven and says that the turkey needs some attention, she isn’t necessarily announcing a problem. She may be offering to solve it – if you let her. You don’t have to do everything; you don’t even have to be great at everything you do. As Jon Katzenbach found in the research that led to his book *Peak Performance*, companies that energize the workforce to achieve exceptional results distinguish themselves through their commitment and focus, not by trying to do everything. The most successful companies make choices about what they can do with distinction. Think back to your strategic intent for this Thanksgiving. What are one or two things that you do really well and that it would make the most difference for you to focus on today? You can’t afford to overload yourself with activities because you need to be the eye at the center, observing and drawing attention to other people’s contributions. At Katzenbach Partners, we see vividly every day how what may appear to be the work of just one or two people is actually the result of many people’s efforts and insights. Case in point: special thanks for this article go to Rachel Tornheim, Damon Beyer, Michael Dawson, HK Dunston, Michael Ellis, Kathy Gallo, Deirdre McGinty, Shanti Nayak, and especially to Kerri Nowe, whose research and coordination were essential. As the afternoon unfolds, whether you position yourself in the living room or the kitchen, let your words and actions reflect your appreciation for others and your sense of what you can accomplish together.

This is how a great business leader achieves success: not by doing many things, but by doing things coherently, bringing all the elements together into a singular experience.

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