

## A Recipe For Legal Project Management: Look To BBQ Champs

By **Anthony Rospert**

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Outside the courtroom, one of my hobbies is judging competition barbecue. As a master certified barbecue judge with the Kansas City Barbeque Society, I recently had the honor of judging the Sam's Club National BBQ Championship in Bentonville, Arkansas. Fifty of the top professional BBQ teams in the country competed for \$150,000, the richest purse in competition BBQ. One thing I noticed was that the same small group of pitmasters always seems to excel — their teams are consistently in the money at any given competition no matter the geographic location or the mix of judges. The judging process is double-blind, so these pitmasters are not winning based on reputation. It made me wonder: What gives them an edge? What is driving their excellence in BBQ? Is it their sauce and spice rubs? Is it knowing how to select the choice cuts of meat? Do they have the best equipment?



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While all of these factors are important, I believe the real reason is simple: The top pitmasters have developed a consistent, disciplined, comprehensive and repeatable process in planning and executing their BBQ entries. Following a consistent process in approaching each and every competition results in top performance, higher scores and continuous improvement.

The same can be said about applying project management principles to working on legal matters. Intelligent lawyers recognize that using legal project management (LPM) tools and techniques to actively manage engagements helps optimize performance, reduce costs and improve predictability, enabling them to provide clients with superior service and value. Employing project management principles is the “secret sauce” that can help both lawyers and BBQ competitors achieve success.

### **Develop a Recipe for Success: Plan and Prepare**

Advance planning and preparation for any project is necessary to provide direction, continuity and coordination. The top pitmasters use a formal planning process before each competition. They don't just show up the day of the competition, fire up their pits and start smoking their chicken, ribs, pork and brisket. A successful BBQ begins well in advance of the competition by outlining a detailed plan. Champion pitmasters work backward from the turn-in time for each of the four meat categories to develop a schedule setting forth specific tasks that need to be completed at given time intervals. These schedules list not only the tasks that must be performed, they also designate which team member is

responsible for each task. Successful pitmasters do not just decide as they go; they drill down on the details of the plan to achieve the perfection that high-level competition demands. Many also use checklists and templates to ensure consistency and predictability. Because situations inevitably arise that require a change in the schedule (e.g., the pit temperature spikes or the meat temperature plateaus), the pitmaster's plan is flexible enough to accommodate changes and can be revised as needed.

Similarly, LPM requires that lawyers employ a formalized process in planning and executing an engagement. This includes developing a schedule that defines which member of the legal team will perform each task and provides a timeline for completing those tasks. Having a road map showing how a legal project will be executed and how the matter will run start to finish is essential to reaching a project's objectives and achieving the client's goals. A defined, detailed plan also provides the context for team members to understand expectations and outcomes. Engaging in a planning process at the outset of each matter allows lawyers to gain a competitive edge by having a strategic playbook to guide the legal team throughout the engagement.

In law or competition BBQ, having a plan in place avoids inconsistency and inefficiency and helps the team deliver a superior product in a timely fashion.

### **Trim the Fat: Create and Stick to a Budget**

Pitmasters have to be cost-conscious and adhere to a defined budget. Participating in any BBQ competition requires a significant monetary investment to cover the entry fee, bulky specialized equipment and the means to transport it, and meat, spices, rubs and other supplies. Some teams purchase special meats from specialty butchers, which alone can increase costs by hundreds of dollars. However, with the exception of a few national competitions, the available prize money does not justify a win-at-all-costs approach. So the top pitmasters will work within a defined budget based on the available prize money at a given competition. For example, instead of cooking the typical two pork shoulders, two briskets, 12 to 16 pieces of chicken and three racks of ribs, the pitmaster may decide to cook half as much to reduce expenses. This not only helps manage costs, it requires a more thoughtful, measured cooking strategy, as there is less room for error in producing a quality entry.

As part of a comprehensive, disciplined approach to managing legal projects, lawyers and their clients also develop budgets as a concrete way to help control costs, improve efficiency and provide the transparency and accountability clients need to better manage resources and expectations. A well-designed budget is more than a financial estimate; it sets priorities and reflects strategy. Using budgets helps lawyers manage legal matters more effectively so they can provide better client service, improve results and reduce costs. Important elements of any legal budget include a consistent format across types of matters, the ability to modify quickly and the ability to reflect actual costs against budgeted amounts. Creating a budget enables the lawyer and client to make proactive strategic decisions about the matter and determine whether the costs justify a particular course of action.

Ultimately, the goal of the budgeting process for lawyers and pitmasters is the same — containing costs without sacrificing quality.

### **Tend the Fire: Monitor Progress**

Creating a plan and budget is only half the job. Successful pitmasters are laser-focused on their goals, and they constantly monitor their progress to ensure that they are on track throughout the BBQ

process. One key item that needs to be closely monitored during a BBQ competition is pit temperature. Indeed, fire management is a critical component — it is impossible to cook great BBQ with unstable temperatures. It is so crucial that most teams will have members sleep in shifts so the smoker can be tended and the temperature can be monitored throughout the night. The top pitmasters also rely on technology to monitor their smokers; many use a specially calibrated fan system that feeds the right amount of oxygen into the smoker to ensure a consistent pit temperature.

Likewise, to ensure proper execution, work plans and legal budgets must be monitored through the use of metrics and reporting. A best LPM practice is to implement a consistent, periodic reporting process that keeps the client and legal team informed on progress and keeps the matter on task. Technology tools, such as monitoring software, ensure efficiency and accuracy in measuring metrics including budget-to-actual spend, percentage of completion and cycle time for aspects of the project. Moreover, during the life of a case or transaction, situations often develop that suggest the need for revising the project plan, timeline or budget. When the lawyer is closely monitoring the matter, he or she can act quickly and proactively to collaborate with the client to identify the impact of the change on legal strategy, timeline and budget options. Together they can agree on the appropriate adjustments and revise the project tasks as needed to ensure the project is completed on time and in furtherance of the client's goals. The monitoring process also promotes open communication between lawyer and client, which facilitates predictability of costs and helps avoid unhappy surprises.

Tracking project-related metrics, including team performance and task duration, identifying potential problems and taking corrective actions are all keys to success, whether one is handling a legal matter or competing for BBQ bragging rights.

### **Perfect the Process: Conduct an After-Action Review**

Every project yields information that will be useful in planning future projects. Pitmasters receive feedback following each competition in the form of a score sheet listing judges' scores for the appearance, taste and tenderness of the team's meat entries. In addition, judges sometimes provide the cooks with comment cards containing constructive feedback on improving the team's entries. For example, a judge may indicate that the chicken was too salty or that the ribs were slightly overcooked. Some teams use software to track feedback and results, taking into account common BBQ variables such as temperature and cook duration, the sauce/rub combination, or even the type of wood used or the weather at the time of the cook. The pitmaster then can use this information to perfect their process for the next big competition.

A completed case or transaction also provides useful information regarding the resources used and time required to complete the project, as well as its costs. The key is to gather information by conducting an after-action review to take advantage of prior efforts and results. At the end of an engagement, a lawyer should conduct post-mortems with the legal team and with the client to review successes and failures and suggest modifications to approach and process to improve performance on future engagements. For example, the team might consider using a different process or sequence for some discovery or due diligence tasks. The goal of this review is to evaluate performance and find areas needing improvement so the LPM process is constantly refined. Capturing the lessons learned through an after-action review ensures that efficient, repeatable processes are continually improved based on practical experience and the use of internal systems and tools.

Whether striving to stay ahead of the competition on the BBQ circuit or to achieve positive outcomes for clients, continuous improvement should always be a goal.

## **The Meat of the Matter**

Historian, philosopher and author Will Durant, paraphrasing Aristotle, had it right when he said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” As I hope this article has illustrated, successful lawyers and champion pitmasters alike can employ project management principles to achieve their common goal of reaching a favorable outcome. The key — or “secret sauce” — is to consistently apply these basic fundamentals to each engagement and continually seek to refine the processes to achieve continuous improvement.

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