# Pouring your Efforts down the Drain

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Ever since I can remember, I've enjoyed cooking. There is something about dancing around the kitchen with a glass of wine, listening to jazz and testing the limits of my mind's intuition for spices.

I've heard it said that being a cook is one of those 'either ya got it or ya don't' kind of things, and I tend to agree. It took me a few trials to learn that I was capable of a guess and check method, and eventually I became comfortable with pinches, dashes, splashes, and the like.

Recently, as the Wisconsin temperatures dropped into comfort food territory, I emailed my mom for her famous wild rice soup recipe. I'd never made it before, but thought it was about time to learn.

"It's a little bit of frogging around," she said. "And make sure you follow the recipe."

Believe me, I had every intention of doing so, until I saw how much butter and flour was in it, and how long I was required to thicken said butter/flour. It can't hurt if I cut down this butter and flour part, I thought to myself. If it needs thickening, I can add some starch and we'll be in business.

Wrong.

After wrestling around for an hour, I wound up with a watery mess. After the soup failed to thicken, I made the mistake of cooking it just a little too long and the skim milk base separated into water and … yeah. Yuck. By the time I got around to adding the rice, I could already hear the soup's death rattle.

I emailed my mom the next day and walked her through my soup disaster, at which point she explained that the “butter and flour part” was called the “roux” — an essential step in building the base of the soup. “Without that, you’re never going to get it to taste right.”

I guess there is something to be said for following the recipe.

It’s interesting how often we talk about Lean manufacturing and don’t really heed the words themselves. I say this, because my bastardization of this soup recipe was really my attempt to eliminate non-value-added activity. Building the roux was a longer step than I was interested in taking, not to mention all the additional fat content in the butter. So I improvised, and paid the price in the end.

The problem was not really with me trying to Lean the process, but with my failure to identify which were the essential steps. Without the proper foundation to support it, my soup base was destined to collapse in the heat. And believe me, it doesn’t feel good to pour all of your efforts down the drain.

A Lean undertaking is far better served when there is a plan of action: An analytical approach to where, when, and why — rather than a pinch or a dash of it here or there. As indiscriminately as I ruined my soup by eliminating the wrong steps, so can you encumber your own undertakings.

I made the soup again the next night, following the steps meticulously and patiently building the foundation for all of the soup’s ingredients. And you know what? It turned out great.

*Do you cook by the book, or have you come up with ways to eliminate that non-value-added activity? What about in your lean programs? Let me know at* anna.wells@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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