

Best Practices in Management Case Studies
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Case studies are a popular method of instruction today in management training programs around the world. Among methods used to educate tomorrow's business leaders, they are nearly as commonplace as lectures and traditional readings as sources of business knowledge. However, not all case studies are created equal. There are a number of factors that raise the level of learning that may be derived from the superior case study. While some of the factors may be argued and disputed, there are those that are commonly accepted and universally understood by writers, professors, and students alike.

Before discussing these factors, however, it may be helpful to examine the purposes and uses of the case study. Typically, cases have been used for teaching purposes in academic settings to illustrate applications of theory and practice, to define problems, and to understand complex situations (Richardson, 1994; Nelson, 1996). Case studies may also be used from a research perspective to either empirically develop new ideas or to test existing theories (Nelson, 1996). But while typically associated with undergraduate and graduate students in business-related disciplines, the use of business-relevant cases have found their way into other academic disciplines (Cinneide, 1998). In addition to being a mainstay of the academic diet, case studies are seeing increasing use as corporate managerial training tools for those already in the business world (Kellogg, 1985). However, the case study is still useful and popular for increasing the participatory nature of the classroom environment (Cinneide, 1998) while doing so in a safe manner that is conducive to productive experiential learning (Nelson, 1996).

After a review of the literature available on the development and presentation of case studies, it is clear that the best case studies must have a defined purpose, be relevant to a particular audience, be real, and must provide information candidly.

First, cases must hold true to the objectives of why the case was written. Case studies are useful for many areas of study other than learning theory and supplementing lectures and traditional readings. Cases can be used to grow core competencies not associated directly with theory (Richardson, 1994). The depth and breadth possessed by many case studies allows for ease of use in student group work (David, 2003; Richardson, 1994). Additionally, cases can serve as building blocks and vital preparation for more advanced attempts at exposing students to "real life" business situations, such as simulations, role-playing sessions and guest lectures from the organization the case was based upon (Richardson, 1994). Cases have not only been restricted to academic settings, but have also been used as problem-solving tools within companies and organizations to create a blame-free, solution-oriented approach by upper-level management executives (Kellogg, 1985). In some international situations, case studies written in English have even been used to aid in language studies for MBA students (Hornaday, 1995). Whatever purpose a case is being developed for must be clearly defined in the early stage of a case's development (Cinneide, 1998; David, 2003; Nelson, 1996).

Good case studies must also be relevant to their intended audience. For many current business students, this usually means that the examples must be current. While some very well-known “classic cases” may be used (Cinneide, 1998), students greatly benefit from cases that are drawn from current news sources and events as the interest level and personal relevance to the events mentioned in the case is higher (David, 2003). Additionally, case studies must be specific to the cultural and national context for which they will be used (Nelson, 1996). For example, when Indonesian officials began a campaign to develop MBA programs for students in their country, the initial case studies that were used typically focused on American companies that were not well-known in Indonesia. Instead of using the case studies to spur individual student's knowledge of management theory, most of the time was spent attempting to explain the context and nature of various American companies and of the business environment in the United States (Hornaday, 1995).

The best cases must be real cases, as opposed to those that are fictional. Real case studies tend to hold student's interest. Of immediate concern to business management students is their own career placement and future job opportunities. The possibility of a student being able to research a company that the student may be interested in obtaining employment with may be enough of a reason to use real cases. However, there are additional reasons to use real-life case examples as well. As discussed previously, cases are best understood in the cultural and national business environments in which they are set. In addition to this potentially problematic situation for students, there is also the possibility of misunderstanding a case due to a lack of historical context of the examples presented by the case, as well. Real-life case, that are set in the present time, allow students to concentrate on an observable environment and does not punish them for a dearth of historical knowledge or prior business experience (David, 2003; Cinneide, 1998).

Most importantly, real companies allow for greater depth of study for students. By using real companies, student's may go outside of the material presented in the case to obtain a greater depth of knowledge than that strictly presented by the case (David, 2003). In addition, the many facets associated with a particular case study may lend itself to a greater degree of task diversification which in turn makes cases great opportunities for team and group-based projects that mimic the real-world and allows for the development of competencies in these areas (Richardson, 1994).

Finally, for students to gain the most benefit from case studies, the information must be presented candidly and truthfully. In addition to the style of writing with which this information is presented, this must be done through the use of different types of data. While any organization that is going through or has gone through a substantive change or growth is a good candidate to be the subject of a case study, the best candidates make those that are public, as this will allow for the greatest amount of accurate information on the company to be available (David, 2003). Not only will vital background and major players in the case organization be available for student's review and consideration (Nelson, 1996), but all important financial statements will be available for use by students to understand both the current and future operating situation for the case organization. Not only will the comprehensiveness and availability of information allow for greater transparency and ability to make more accurate analysis of the case, but there will be less

of an opportunity for the target of the case to control the information that is made available for the case's development as if it were just another part of an advertising campaign (David, 2003).

While there are many mediocre case studies that do not meet the requirements of having a clearly defined purpose, being relevant to the intended audience, are not real, and are not candid, there are a number of cases that do have what it takes to be great learning tools. By being aware of what it takes to make a better case study, there will be an overall higher quality in the future body of cases available to managerial students. Thus, there will also be more emphasis on case-based learning in the future. This will have definite benefits for students and their future employers as the case learning method gives the knowledge of a subject area along with a great deal of training in applying analytical and creative skills to the challenges faced everyday in the business world.

References

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