

CASE STUDY METHOD: FOR TRAINING AND CASE-WRITING

Ajay Kr. Rathore*
Ashvine Kumar**

Abstract: *The case-study method has a long and respected history in the mainstream management literature. The philosophy and implications of the case-study method have received considerable attention and there are a number of standard texts on the approach. The method is also gaining acceptance, along with other qualitative methods, within the small business and entrepreneurial research community. Yet there has been little discussion of the distinctive philosophical consequences of applying the case-study approach in this area. This article will address this gap by mapping the paradigms adopted by different case-study researchers. This will provide a platform upon which to explore the consequences of the paradigmatic position that researchers adopt.*

Introduction

The case study method of teaching is based on the fact that learning can best occur when the participant is involved in solving a problem which reflects a real life situation. It takes into account the fact that the basic role of a manager / administrator is to make and implement decisions. These decisions need to be based on such information as is available to him. Not always, however, he has access to unlimited information, and, therefore, the effectiveness of his decision rests on his analytical skills and on how best he can make use of the available information.

Correspondingly, the case study method presents the learner with a description of a situation, with an adequate amount of information. The task of the learner is to analyze the situation individually or in group, and to suggest the appropriate solution to the identified problem.

There are numbers of advantages of using the case study method as a training tool:

1. **Encourages Active Participation:** It has a distinct edge over the conventional lecture method because it encourages active participation by the learner in the process of learning.

2. **Real Life Situation:** A case study presents a real life situation in an objective manner, thus enabling the learner to study it in detail. It provides an opportunity to make use of, sometimes, limited data by asking relevant questions. The objective diagnosis of causes and alternatives for the problem broadens the understanding of the learner about the managerial / administrative situation.
3. **Diverse View Point:** The discussion among the participants which accompanies the Case Study Method exposes the learner to varied and diverse view points to the same problem. Thus, it brings home the point, that there may be several, equally valid, ways of looking at and solving the problem.
4. **Develops The Analytical Abilities:** The Case Study Method develops the analytical abilities and a systematic way of problem solving among the participants. The interactions and resolution of differences help the participants in focusing on and in re-examining their untested assumptions and attitudes in decision making.
5. **Facilitates the Learning-By-Discovery:** The Case Study Method facilitates the process of

*Ajay Kr. Rathore, Professor, Tecnia Institute of Management Studies, New Delhi, E-mail id:ajay_rathore160@rediffmail.com

** Ashvine Kumar, Professor, SBMIMSAR, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak

learning-by-discovery. Through analyzing the case, the participant discovers some of the case also provides opportunity for experimentation with various alternative decisions.

6. **Developing Communicating Skill:** Lastly, the necessity of articulating, discussing and arguing for a particular viewpoint helps the participant in developing his communicating skill- a useful skill for the manager / administrator to carry his people along with him.

Types of Cases

Case studies have an enormous amount of flexibility in the way they are prepared and use. This flexibility allows the trainer to choose and utilize cases according to the learning objectives he has in mind. He may, for example, use a case study to stimulate the problem-solving and decision-making abilities of the participant, or he may like to utilize a case to illustrate certain managerial / administrative issues or situations. In the latter case the learning-objective in the case of the case study would be the sharpening of analytical skills, just short of decision-making.

Similarly, case studies may also differ in terms of the amount and manner in which the information is presented to the participants. The case may be extremely detailed, or very succinct; all the information may be presented at once or gradually; and, the manner of presentation may be purely through written material, or films / video may be used for creating greater impact. Each of these alternatives would have different influence in the learning-process.

Now, we will describe briefly various types of cases. Obviously, the type of case described below is not mutually exclusive and considerable overlaps exist among various types. The aim of this discussion, however, is not to build up an academic taxonomy but to demonstrate the heterogeneity and the scope for innovativeness which exists in using and preparing cases.

Decision and Problem Cases

These cases are most popular in the training courses. They describe a business situation which incorporates a problem, and a decision is required to be taken by the participants. Such cases are open-ended in the sense that no solution is given, and the participant is required to study, analyze and discuss

the case, with a view to come to a solution.

In preparing decision-cases, it is important that the information is drawn from field research or from generalized experience, and not solely from published material and files. The reason for this is that in the real-life situation, the manager also draws information from various non-formal sources for taking decisions. Thus, data from field-research, personal interviews, and common observation give a more realistic picture of the situation.

Appraisal Cases

Such cases aim at teaching the participants, the skills of analysis or appraisal of situations, short of making decisions and recommendations for action. The question which the learner attempts to answer is "what is happening" rather than "what to do". Of course, an appraisal case can always be converted into a decision case by asking the participants, "In such situation what would you have done?" However, many a time, the trainer may decide that analysis and understanding of a business phenomenon rather than attempting a solution, is of greater relevance to the participant. For example, an appraisal case may describe the record of conversation between a worker and a supervisor which led to a tool-down strike. Here, trainer may feel that understanding the nuances of communication skills may be of greater benefit to the participant, rather than trying to decide what the supervisor should have done. Similarly, an appraisal case which recounts the various events which led to an industrial disaster may offer a great insight to the participant about the diverse influences and factors working in the situation.

(NOTE: The above two types of cases may be considered as two basic broad categories of cases. The other types of cases, described below can be of either decision type or appraisal type.)

Classical or "Harvard" Cases

These are much detailed case reports, running sometimes into fifty or sixty pages of text, with supportive charts and documents. Anything which may have remote bearing on the situation is included in the case: the company-history, biographies and personality sketches of key persons, texts of contracts and agreements, information about finance, marketing, production and other functions, etc. All the information given in the case may not be pertinent to the situation. The problem may also not be described

in the case-brief. Thus, the learner's task is to sift through this plethora of information, identify the problem, select the relevant set of information and then to solve the problem.

The greatest advantage of such case is their comprehensiveness. The process of analyzing these cases provides a total feel of the organization to the participant. He also learns to appreciate the inter-relatedness of various functions and activities in the organizational contexts.

The disadvantage with such cases, however, is that they are very time-consuming, and the learner may get disheartened or confused due to the information overload. While, in real life the individual has to perform similar operations as he does in such cases, in the class-room situation there is a danger of losing the focus for learning.

Short Case lets

In contrast to the Harvard-type long cases, these cases are succinct, focusing on a particular problem, and of a length of about one or two pages. No extraneous information is given and it is easy to identify the problem. If it is not already given such case lets are excellent for generating discussion and problem-solving exercise around a given type of organizational problem. Since very less extraneous information is given, discussions on such cases, easily brings out the experience and assumptions of the participants in the decision-making process.

The disadvantage of case lets, however is, that they are having limited focus and they fail to simulate the totality of the organizational reality. The decisions attempted by the participants approach a theoretical idealism, since not much information about other factors which influence the problem situation is given.

Incident Process Cases

Incident process is an interesting variation in the case method. The assumption underlying such cases is that in the real life, events have an unfolding quality, which reading through a conventional case failed to capture. The real life problem-solving proceeds by asking questions, collecting information and analyzing it, and not by selecting and rejecting from a vast amount of information.

Correspondingly, in the incident process, the case may report merely a statement (e.g., a foreigner saw two workers fighting with each other). The case leader

withholds all other information, and shares it only when some participant asks for it. If no one asks for it, the information remains with the leader. Thus, the availability of information, for problem-solving, depends on how participants analyze the situation and on the types of question which they ask about the problem.

Other Variation

Apart from the types of cases described above the Case-Study Method allows for a variety of innovations in its use and presentation. For example, a video recording of the proceedings of a meeting may be added to a case to reinforce its realism. Or the participants may be given only a collection of newspaper reports, magazine articles and other published material about a situation, to avoid the subjective bias of the case writer. The trainer may play his own variations, depending on the objectives he has in mind. The only limitation to such variations, apart from the ingenuity of the case-writer is that they should not decrease the realism of the presentation.

Using Case Study Method

The styles for conducting case-study session which are adopted by different trainers vary greatly. These styles may range from a highly trainer-centered style to a highly participant-centered style. Which style the trainer finds most suitable depends on a number of determining factors, including the learning-objective, type of case, participants, level, time availability, and, of course, the personality of the trainer. Table 1 compares these two styles along a number of determining variables.

There are no fixed ground-rules for conducting successful case-study sessions. Much would depend on various factors, as can be seen from Table-1. Even then it is always advisable to learn somewhat more toward the participant-centered style of conducting case-study sessions, namely, the required preparation and discussion-leading.

1. Preparing for the Case

Contrary to the common misconception, using a case requires more intensive preparation, from the trainer, than does the conventional lecture method. While in the lecture-method, the trainer has a great amount of control over the nature of learning, and the "logical pattern" in which the contents are to be

Table 1: Comparison of Trainer-Centered and Participant-Centered Styles of Conducting Case-Study Session

Determining Variables		Styles	
		Trainer-Centered	Participant-Centered
1.	Emphasis	Content of learning: "What is learnt?"	Process of learning: "How it is learnt".
2.	Learning-Objectives	Illustration of specific concept(s)	Developing individual analytic and problem-solving skills; encouraging participant to develop experience-based concepts.
3.	Time-availability	Less time	Enough time
4.	Participants' level of preparation	Unprepared	Well-prepared
5.	Participants' level of experience with case-context	Inexperienced participants	Advanced and "post experience" participants.
6.	Nature of Case	Very complex; structure of events, relationships, problems etc. not so obvious; unstructured.	Fairly obvious structure of events, relationships, problems, etc.
7.	Trainer's personality Characteristic	High need for order and control; low tolerance of ambiguity; extreme task-orientation	Greater interpersonal trust; high risk-taking; preference for complexity.

presented, the Case Study Method is largely unstructured. In the Case Method, the trainer has no control over the kind of questions which the participants may raise, the sequence in which the concepts may find relevance in the case for their learning, etc. to deal with such structuredness in a meaningful conducting the session.

The Salient points of trainer's preparation are;

- a. He must be intimately familiar with all the facts of the case, and must be ready with as many logical interpretations of the facts as possible;
- b. He must be aware of the various analytical approaches which may be used for solving the case;
- c. He must prepare in advance the list of various concepts, theories or techniques which may be of use during the discussion (even if he may not get an opportunity to use them in the class) and;
- d. He must not be so convinced of the correctness of any single solution that he is unable to

appreciate other approaches and solutions given by the students.

2. Leading the Case Discussion

Trainers employ different procedures for introducing the case and generating the discussions. Very often, the trainers divide the class into smaller groups, in which the participants study, analyze and solve the case. This is followed by a "presentation" by each group, and a summing-up by the trainer. While this procedure is useful, it dilutes the very essence of the Case Study Method, in that, without the trainer's interventions, many salient concepts may be missed by the group, or the views of the "silent members" may not receive adequate weightage.

A better approach in introducing cases is to lead an open discussion, after giving the participants enough time for preparation, either individually or in a group. The following are the salient features of leading the case discussion:

a) The Trainer's Role

The trainer's role in discussion-leading is that of a

process expert. By asking question and through interventions, he keeps the group moving. It is his task to maintain a balance among the various aspects of the discussions (e.g., the topic, participants' personal experiences, general principles, conceptual theories, etc.) so that the discussion remains relevant.

Since no two participants will view the case in identical ways, there interpretations may be drastically different. The trainer's effectiveness will depend on how he can keep different viewpoints "alive" in the group, without discouraging the proponent of either viewpoint. He must also take care of the shy and the over-talkative members.

In leading the discussion, the trainer's role as subject-experts is minimal. The ideal discussion would be one in which all the relevant concepts emerge from

explicit understanding of the problem, generation of alternatives, and finally, selection of specific solution(s) to the problem. A discussion in which the participants agree too soon on the solution would fail to facilitate the learning process; similarly, if the discussion continues without the participants coming to a common understanding, it may leave the participants confused and dissatisfied. A good discussion falls well within these two extremes. That is, learning would be optimum in a discussion where the group spends enough time in understanding and analyzing problem and only then attempting to solve it. Thus, a good discussion would show an initial divergence of ideas, issues viewpoints, followed by their gradual convergence to a few specific solutions or a solution. (See Exhibit: 1).

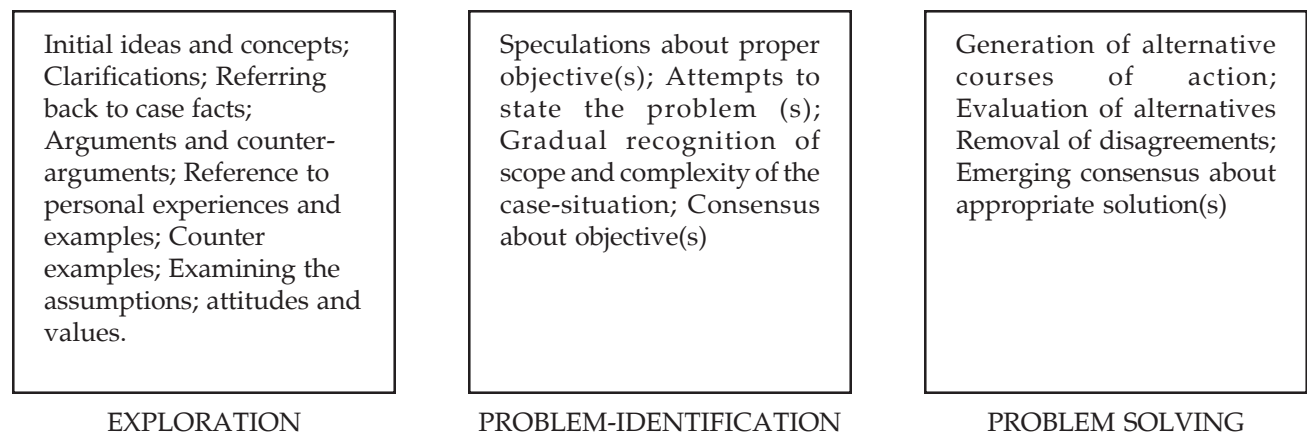


Exhibit 1: Stages of Case Discussion over time

the group discussion. The task of the trainer would be to pin-point these concepts and draw attention of the class to them. However, in some cases, the trainer may find it useful to give small lecturettes on relevant concepts, during the discussions. He must take care; however, that introduction of concepts by him should have a facilitating effect, rather than an inhibiting effect on the discussion.

b) The Discussion Process

A fruitful discussion process would entail an intensive and systematic analysis of the situation,

Since the objectives behind group discussion is to involve all the participants in the problem solving process, the group should not be monopolized by a few dominant members. Another danger in group discussion is that it may turn into question answer session between the trainer and the participants (as in Exhibit: 2) Ideally, it should not be so and trainer's interventions should be limited to stimulating groups, keeping the discussion on the subject and ensuring the group that it is getting maximum benefit from the discussion. (Exhibit: 3)

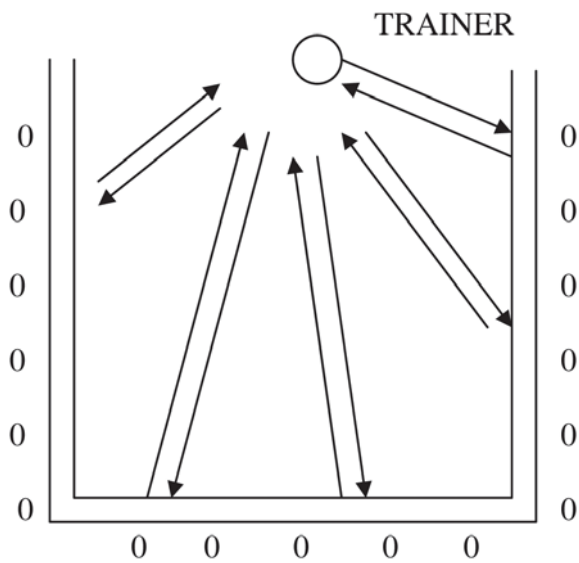


Exhibit 2: Trainer centred discussion

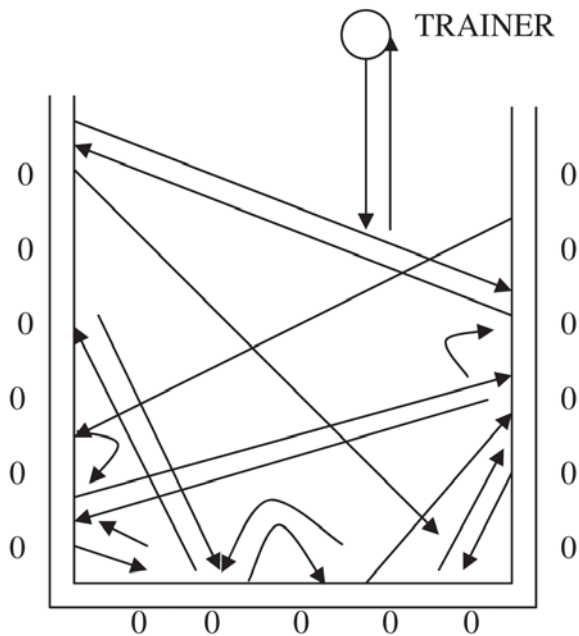


Exhibit 3: Participant centred discussion

c) Trainer’s Interventions

In leading the group discussion, and for optimizing the learning through it, the intervention made by the trainer are significant influencing variables. The kind of interventions the trainer makes as the discussion leader are natural consequences of

his role as the process expert. The trainer can stimulate the discussion and learning –process by asking relevant questions, probing, summarizing and giving conceptual inputs at the appropriate time during the discussion. In a way, the trainer manages the meaning within the group, in that his intervention highlights certain the group, in that his interventions highlights certain points of the discussion while deemphasizing the irrelevant issues. The exact nature and content of these interventions would depend on the trainers interpersonal skills. However, his intervention must ensure the following:

- Encourage participation by all members
- Control the over talkative members
- Discourage monopolization
- Tactfully de-emphasis irrelevant contribution
- Avoid personal arguments
- Keep discussion within defined limits
- Give feedback to the group
- Make the group feel that they are moving through frequent summarization
- Highlight relevant points.

Writing A Case

The preparation of a case is both a science and art. Normally a case is based on field research, though often the case-writer may write a case based on “generalized experience” to suit his purpose. This is specially so with cases on human relations).the task of the case writer is to put down the facts of the situation in an unbiased and objectives way, narrating the course of events around the focus of the case.

Case writing follows four basics steps:

1. Identification of Case-Focus and Case-Lead

The case-writer should be clear about the types of problems around which he wants to write the case. This would, obviously, depend on the learning objectives of the course in which the case is to be used.

Once the objectives of case-writing are clear, the next step is to look for the case leader. The information collected from the colleagues, participants or other sources (e.g. a newspaper report etc) many a time, however, in the initial phase of data-collection, the case-writer may finds that the situation, as existing,

does not meet his objectives in writing the case. He will have to decide, then, whether to stop there, or to change the objectives of the proposed case

2. Collection of data

In any organizational setting, data can be collected only when the relevant people involved in the situation are willing to co-operate. Thus, it is essential for the case-writer to first meet these people to intimate them about the nature of work and to assure them of the confidentiality of all data. Only after this has been done can the data collection proceed.

The basic requirement in data collection is the objectivity with which the facts are recorded. The case-writer must consciously avoid his own interpretation of the situation, while collecting data. All facts situation, events and opinions, etc., must be carefully observed and documented. The general rule is that the case-writer must, within practical limitations, make notes and collect exhibits of every situation or event which has bearing on the case. Later on, during the case-writing phase a logical structure in the form of a running narrative may be given to the data.

It is of course, almost impossible to observe and record all information pertaining to the case, due to practical limitations. One must also avoid the temptation to go for such perfection. Rather, a well documented case would be one which incorporated such information as is normally available to any executive (and the executive never has all the information). In addition, a case may also contain some information which is irrelevant to the problem-situation. This would help in sharpening the participant's skill in identifying the problem.

3. Case-Writing

To write a case one must decide what material is to be included or to be excluded from the case. The criteria for deciding this would depend upon:

- The learning-objective which the case aims to fulfill.
- the length and structure which the case-writer envisages to be most useful; and
- The type of case, and its mode of presentation which the case writer decides.

The precise manner (i.e., the body of the case) may differ from case-writer to case-writer. Whether he

wants to start with the problem-situation and then give the background information, or whether he would like to give accompanying information in appendix, etc., are matters of personal style and preference of the writers. Some case writers may like to include "technical notes" (information about technology available/used) or "industry notes" (information about the state of industry in the economy) as a part of the case text. The only criterion which one should bear in mind is the readability of the case. If the participant finds the case disjointed or tedious to read, the effectiveness of the case would go down. It is a good practice, therefore, to set the scene quickly, so that the participant knows what kind of problem he is supposed to deal with, and his curiosity is maintained.

Another, important point to bear in mind is the objectivity of the reported data in the case. The case writer must avoid all interpretation in writing the case. The narrative must be given in the lowest levels of abstraction. For example, "workers were seen talking for long periods after tea breaks or near the toilets" is an objective narration, while "workers were idle and undisciplined" shows interpretation of facts by the case writer. It is a sound practice to refer to question of who, what, when, why and where while writing the case but to avoid writing about how and why (these may be put, when essential) as the opinion expressed by concerned people.

It is also preferable to write the case using past tense. This would increase its utility for courses conducted later.

Lastly, the case writer must decide on the disguise. Most often, organizations and executives would be reluctant to expose the mistakes committed by them. Thus, the facts of the case (e.g., name, company etc.) need to be disguised. The disguise must be decided carefully, so that it does not distort the focus of the case. For ease in writing, one may write the final draft of the case using real name and events and then introduce the disguise.

4. Clearance and Validation:

Once the final draft of the case is prepared, it must be reviewed with the concerned executive (s) of the organization. In fact, the review process is often concurrent with the data collection stage, during which pieces of information may be cross-checked with concerned executives.

5. What An Evaluator Looks For In A Case Analysis

The important elements that a counselor (or evaluator) would generally look for in a case analysis are:

- Care with which facts and background knowledge have been used.
- Ability to state problems and issues clearly
- Use of appropriate analytical techniques
- Evidence of sound logic and arguments
- Consistency between analysis and recommendations
- Ability to formulate feasible recommendations for action

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