

Preparing an Effective Case Analysis

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Using the Case Method

The case method brings reality into the classroom. When developed and presented effectively, with rich and interesting detail, cases keep conceptual discussions grounded in reality.

The case method can help you develop your analytical and judgment skills. Case analysis also helps you learn how to ask the right questions. Students aspiring to be managers and business owners can improve their ability to identify underlying problems, rather than focusing on superficial symptoms, through development of the skills required to ask probing, yet appropriate, questions. The particular set of cases your instructor chooses to assign the class can expose you to a wide variety of organizations and managerial situations. This approach vicariously broadens your experience base and provides insights into many types of situations, tasks, and responsibilities. Finally, experience in analyzing cases definitely enhances your problem-solving skills.

Furthermore, when your instructor requires oral and written presentations, your communication skills will be honed through use of the case method. Of course, these added skills depend on your preparation as well as your instructor's facilitation of learning. However, the primary responsibility for learning is yours. The quality of case discussion is generally acknowledged to require, at a minimum, a thorough mastery of case facts and some independent analysis of them. The case method therefore first requires that you read and think carefully about each case. Additional comments about the preparation you should complete to successfully discuss a case appear in the next section.

Student Preparation for Case Discussion

If you are inexperienced with the case method, you may need to alter your study habits. A lecture-oriented course may not require you to do intensive preparation for each class period. In such a course, you have the latitude to work through assigned readings and review lecture notes according to your own schedule. However, an assigned case requires significant and conscientious preparation before class. Without it, you will be unable to contribute meaningfully to in-class discussion. Therefore, careful reading and thinking about case facts, as well as reasoned analyses and the development of alternative solutions to case problems, are essential. Recommended

alternatives should flow logically from core problems identified through study of the case. Table 1 shows a set of steps that can help you develop familiarity with a case, identify problems, and propose strategic actions that increase the probability that a business will achieve strategic competitiveness and earn above-average returns.

Table 1 An Effective Case Analysis Process	
Step 1: <i>Gaining Familiarity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. In general--determine who, what, how, where and when (the critical facts in a case). b. In detail--identify the places, persons, activities, and contexts of the situation. c. Recognize the degree of certainty/uncertainty of acquired information.
Step 2: <i>Recognizing Symptoms</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. List all indicators (including stated "problems") that something is not as expected or as desired b. Ensure that symptoms are not assumed to be the problem (symptoms should lead to identification of the problem).
Step 3 <i>Identifying goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify critical statements by major parties (e.g., people, groups, the work unit, etc.). b. List all goals of the major parties that exist or can be reasonably inferred.
Step 4 <i>Conducting the Analysis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Decide which ideas, models, and theories seem useful. b. Apply these conceptual tools to the situation. c. As new information is revealed, cycle back to substeps a and b.
Step 5 <i>Making the Diagnosis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify predicaments (goal inconsistencies). b. Identify problems (discrepancies between goals and performance). c. Prioritize predicaments/problems regarding timing, importance, etc.
Step 6 <i>Doing the Action Planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Specify and prioritize the criteria used to choose action alternatives. b. Discover or invent feasible action alternatives. c. Examine the probable consequences of action alternatives. d. Select a course of action. e. Design an implementation plan/schedule. f. Create a plan for assessing the action to be implemented.

Source: C.C. Lundberg and C.ENZ, 1993, A framework for student case preparation, *Case Research Journal* 13 (summer): 144.

Gaining Familiarity

The first step of an effective case analysis process calls for you to become familiar with the facts featured in the case. Initially, you should become familiar with the focal business's general situation (e.g., who, what, how, where, and when). Thorough familiarization demands appreciation of the nuances as well as the major issues in the case.

Gaining familiarity with a situation requires you to study several situational levels, including interactions between and among individuals within groups. Recognizing relationships facilitates a more thorough understanding of the specific case situation. It is also important that you evaluate information on a continuum of certainty. Information that is verifiable by several sources and judged along similar dimensions can be classified as a fact. Information representing someone's perceptual judgment of a particular situation is referred to as an inference. Information gleaned from a situation that is not verifiable is classified as speculation. Finally, information that is independent of verifiable sources and arises through individual or group discussion is an assumption. Obviously, case analysts and decision makers prefer having access to facts over inferences, speculations, and assumptions.

Personal feelings, judgments, and opinions evolve when you are analyzing a case. It is important to be aware of your own feelings about the case and to evaluate the accuracy of perceived "facts" to ensure that the objectivity of your work is maximized.

Recognizing Symptoms

Recognition of symptoms is the second step of an effective case analysis process. A symptom is an indication that something is not as you or someone else thinks it should be. You may be tempted to correct the symptoms instead of searching for true problems. True problems are the conditions or situations requiring solution before a business's performance can improve. Identifying and listing symptoms early in the case analysis process tends to reduce the temptation to label symptoms as problems. The focus of your analysis should be on the actual causes of a problem, rather than on its symptoms. It is important therefore to remember that symptoms are indicators of problems; subsequent work facilitates discovery of critical causes of problems that your case recommendations must address.

Identifying Goals

The third step of effective case analysis calls for you to identify the goals of the business and/or individuals in a case. Completing this step successfully sometimes can be difficult. Nonetheless, the outcomes you attain from this

step are essential to an effective case analysis because identifying goals, intent, and mission helps you to clarify the major problems featured in a case and to evaluate alternative solutions to those problems.

Conducting the Analysis

The fourth step of effective case analysis is concerned with acquiring a systematic understanding of a situation. Occasionally cases are analyzed in a less-than-thorough manner. Such analyses may be a product of a busy schedule or the difficulty and complexity of the issues described in a particular case. Sometimes you will face pressures on your limited amounts of time and may believe that you can understand the situation described in a case without systematic analysis of all the facts. However, experience shows that familiarity with a case's facts is a necessary, but insufficient, step to the development of effective solutions. In fact, a less-than-thorough analysis typically results in an emphasis on symptoms, rather than problems and their causes. To analyze a case effectively, you should be skeptical of quick or easy approaches and answers.

Making the Diagnosis

The fifth step of effective case analysis—diagnosis—is the process of identifying and clarifying the roots of the problems by comparing goals to facts. In this step, it is useful to search for predicaments. Predicaments are situations in which goals do not fit with known facts. When you evaluate the actual performance of an organization or individual, you may identify over- or under-achievement (relative to established goals). Of course, single-problem situations are rare.

Effective diagnosis requires you to determine the problems affecting longer-term performance and those requiring immediate handling. Understanding these issues will aid your efforts to prioritize problems and predicaments, given available resources and existing constraints.

Doing the Action Planning

The final step of an effective case analysis process is called action planning. Action planning is the process of identifying appropriate alternative actions. Important in the action planning step is selection of the criteria you will use to evaluate the identified alternatives.

Typically, managers "satisfice" when selecting courses of actions; that is, they find acceptable courses of action that meet most of the chosen evaluation criteria. A rule of thumb that has proved valuable to decision makers is to

select an alternative that leaves other plausible alternatives available if the one selected fails.

Once you have selected the best alternative, you must specify an implementation plan. Developing an implementation plan serves as a reality check on the feasibility of your alternatives. Thus, it is important that you give thoughtful consideration to all issues associated with the implementation of the selected alternatives.

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