

The Case Method of Instruction

The case method of management instruction is based upon the belief that management is a skill rather than a collection of techniques and concepts. The best way to learn this skill is to experience it through simulation as opposed to a traditional lecture format. Each class is conducted using the dynamics of a team meeting, where the objective is to determine the best course of action and its implementation. Students are the team members and the lecturer is the facilitator. The collective knowledge of the team determines the outcome of each class, not the lecturer. The students decide “the right answer” in the heat of their deliberations, debate, and discussion.

Our purpose in this class is to understand how managers make decisions. To do this requires direct exposure to the decision-making process. Unfortunately, we cannot project ourselves into actual business situations. As a substitute, we can read descriptions of particular business situations and make decisions based upon the data we find there. By doing so, we simulate the functioning of a manager. Descriptions of business situations are frequently referred to as cases.

A case is a statement of conditions, attitudes and practices which exist at some particular time in a company's history. It usually describes a situation in which the company is facing, or has resolved, some challenging problem or problems. Cases are not written to illustrate good or bad management. They are written about interesting business situations that are particularly useful in illustrating a specific set of management issues.

A case provides some, but usually not all, of the information that was available to executives at the time they had to resolve a challenging problem. It frequently includes data on alternative courses of action. Because it is an attempt to reconstitute a real-life situation, a case is purposely written in a manner that requires the rearrangement of facts and interpretation of these facts, including the evaluation of opinions, behavior and intentions. Many of the facts available in a case are relevant to its solution(s), but some may be irrelevant.

This arrangement of the descriptive material, on a somewhat unstructured basis, in itself, simulates the experience of the business executive. Upon first reading a case, you may well ask yourself, “What's all this about?” One of your first adjustments to the case method of instruction will be getting used to the manner in which case material is presented. It will be up to you to develop your analytical ability by reorganizing the particular problems involved. You will have to develop the alternative solutions, gather the appropriate data, evaluate them, and finally make a decision.

To realize the maximum benefit when studying under the case method, you should recognize that:

1. This method of learning calls for the maximum level of individual participation in class discussion.
2. Effective classroom case discussion and analysis can be realized only if each participant has the salient “facts” of the case and his or her analysis well in hand. One does not seek to uncover facts or make the analysis during the discussion, although modifications of both facts and analysis will evolve through the insights provided by the group's effort.
3. Intelligent analysis calls for the recognition and identification of assumptions.
4. Decisions have to be made without all the data one would desire, and this is an asset, not a liability, in case analysis. It reflects the condition facing management in almost every situation.
5. There may be several acceptable solutions to a problem in a case. Definitive answers are rarely, if ever, available. In our learning environment, as opposed to real business situations, the solution is not as significant as the basis on which it is derived.
6. Though learning under the case method is a group process, this does not imply conformity to group opinion.
7. The teacher is a discussion leader, not a lecturer or major contributor of facts and analysis.

8. Learning by the case method, or any other educational approach, is in the final analysis an individual proposition, calling for a maximum level of personal effort and responsibility.
9. Each person will not necessarily speak every day. There is still ample opportunity to benefit from the classroom experience, by comparing your analysis with that being presented and discussed.
10. You must accept a critical atmosphere and be willing to submit your conclusions to rebuttal. You must be willing to accept the risks of stating your conclusions and overcome the fear of making and admitting a mistake.