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**What is a Case**

A case has different meanings according to who uses it, for whom it is used, in which context it is used and how it is used, as it has a vast potential as a training method. Before we define and understand what a case is, let us first understand the importance of this method in adult learning process. A famous Greek author, Nikos Kazantzakis has stated that ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross and once they cross, they collapse happily encouraging those students to create their own bridges. The case method of training is like a bridge which enables trainees to examine a situation, make a diagnosis, and find out solutions and action plan. This method of learning gives the trainees an exposure to the real life situation and puts them in the driver’s seat. The feeling of being in charge makes a trainee more involved which enhances the learning process.

**Definitions**

Some standard definitions relating to a Case are [yen below

A Case is a description of an administrative decision or problem that people are trying to solve or record of an issue that actually has been faced by people involved, e.g. : managers, executives, doctors, engineers, accountants together with the surrounding circumstances, facts, opinions and prejudices on which executive decisions depend. It usually written from the point of view of the decision maker. (Pfeiffer & Ballew, 1983)

A Case is an adventure in thinking. To write one is to participate in not only the reconstruction though abstracts of what was once but in creation of a new event which never was. Its writing requires wit, imagination, objectivity and more important, the respect for truth.

(Economics Development Institute, World Bank, 1983)

The Case technique is based on the belief that the trainee can attain managerial understanding and competence through the study, contemplation and discussion of actual situations. The rigorous analysis required, especially in the longer cases, is said to develop habits of logical thinking and searching for as complete information as possible before reaching conclusions.

(International Labour Organization, 1972)

A Case is a reconstruction of real life situation(s) which is examined by one or a group of trainees, using the mental skills of problem solving and decision making of analysis, synthesis and evaluation for the purpose of establishing those principles which are illustrated by the particular case.

(The Training Technology Programme, England 1987)

The case method can be defined in a broad sense by contrasting it with the lecture method. Instead of textbooks, the case method uses partial, historical descriptions of specific situations enabling students to discover and develop their own unique frame work for problem solving. The case method achieves this goal efficiently and effectively. Data and information are presented in narrative form to encourage student involvement by solving problems actively, by identifying sources of information necessary for problem solving, by engaging critical thinking and through group work.

(World Association for Case Method Research and Application, Boston, U.S.A)

**From these definitions we can summarize that:**

* Case involves an issue/problem from the real life situation for which a viable solution need to be explored.
* Trainees usually discuss in a group, analyze the issue and come out with possible solutions.
* Case could have multiple solutions.
* Case enables trainees to develop their own frame work of problem solving.
* Case initiates trainees to take responsibility and independent thought.
* Case method emphasizes on learning rather than teaching.
* Case method is used for decision makers.

The philosophy of case method is that "The trainees must find enough to discuss and talk in the class" as opposed to lecture method where "the trainer must find enough to talk in the class." This also means that the trainees take the lead in the class giving secondary role to the trainer. But the burden on the trainer increases many fold since he has to prepare thoroughly for every class, as every case class is new and offers new dimensions even if the case was handled by the trainer many times before. He has to evaluate each contribution made by the trainees and also note these contributions which offer diverse views for future classes. The trainer learns in every class as much as he enables the trainees to learn.

For a good number of trainees a case class is not a comfortable experience till they get attuned to it. The trainee who is used to a passive mode of receiving from the trainer is put in an active mode where the trainee has to do most of the work in the class. The case method is equally shocking to those trainers who steeped in safe heavens of their dogmas which will be challenged by the trainees.

During the case class trainees will understand that an individual cannot think about all possible solutions and group work alone generates different possible solutions. This will strengthen team spirit in an individual. Case approach will also bring in maturity in trainees as they will gradually develop a belief that every participant can have his own view point to a case and that the trainer need not know the correct answer and most importantly, there is no categorical right or wrong answer for a case which essentially reflects true life situation.

**Types of Cases**

Cases vary in their size, content and presentation format. There is often a debate on classification of cases, based on the content and complexity of the case. For a trainer, the objective of the session and how effectively the objective is met using a case is more important than the discussion on classification of cases. However, for the classification of cases based on the degrees of complexity of the case. From the typology presented in Table I, we can infer that the main focus of the case can be on (I) Problem; (ii) Solution; and (iii) Action Plan.

**Table I A Typology of Case Studies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Various Elements of the Case** | **Different Types of Case** |
| The problems | 1. The problem is not identified. It is up to the readers to discover what the issue is. (Problem-identification and problem-analysis type) 2. The problem is identified but no solution is presented. The readers search for appropriate ways to handle the problem (problem-solving type) |
| The Solution | 1. The problem is identified and one or several solutions are outlined. The readers are asked to assess the relevance of the presented option(s) 2. The problem is identified, its potential solution decided upon and the outline of an action plan presented. The readers must determine the validity of the suggested action plan. 3. The problem is clearly identified, its solution selected an action carried out and its outcome presented. The readers assess the solution as well as the effectiveness of the action plan. |

As regards the third category of cases which focus on action plan there are no examples in this book. However, these cases can be extended to preparation of action plan also.

The EDI of the World Bank has also classified the cases into five types based on the contents of the case. They are

* Qualitative Case
* Quantitative case or Calculation case
* Simulation
* Critical incident
* Multi-stage case

**Qualitative Case**

A Qualitative case is a realistic presentation of a problem situation which has impact on people, their motivation and performance and requires a practical and creative solution.

The main features of a Qualitative case are:

* Emphasis is on characters, their views, situations, conflicts, aspirations etc.
* Time dimension of the event is important.
* The supporting information is qualitative in nature.
* The main issues govern the destiny of characters.
* Cases are interesting to read and resemble short stories.
* The case setting provides information on the sector.
* The focus is on problem solving and decision making.
* There is no "one best" solution.
* These cases are targeted at decision making authorities.

**Quantitative Case Studies**

A quantitative case is an objective and factual description of a situation with supportive data and with a certain amount of urgency to find a very feasible solution.

Quantitative cases are characterized by

* Time Dimension.
* Subdued characters.
* Focus on facts and numerical data.
* Supportive non-financial information in quantitative terms like share of market, production quantity, percentage of rejections, social indicators etc.
* Generally there is only one best solution.
* Ideal for operational managers and financial analysts.

The case exercises used in banking sector for calculating working capital limits, drawing cash flows, preparing a balance sheet, calculating financial indicators like Internal Rate of Returns, ratios, break even points etc. are examples of quantitative or calculation cases.

**Simulation**

A simulation attempts to reproduce the conditions of a real event so that the trainees can experience the event in a controlled way. In simulation the participant takes part in enacting a real life situation which is controlled by the trainer and hence simulation is action oriented.

Simulations are further subdivided into four types based on the degree of complexity.

*Straight Line Simulation:* This consists of a description of a real life situation and requires spontaneous acting on the part of the trainer to present the issue/s.

*Role Play:* In this type of simulation the trainees have to play a role as advised by the trainer and follow a script prepared in advance. The trainer then debriefs the participants based on the role play enacted by the participants. Subjects like how to negotiate with a bellicose worker can be very effectively taught with the help of role play.

*Laboratory oriented simulation:* The best way to explain this type of simulation is to compare it with a flight simulator where the trainee pilots learn to deal with various parameters and Instruments for flying an airplane. This type of simulation is elaborate and reproduces all the key characteristics of accomplishing a particular task and is very near to the hands-on-experience.

*Business Game:* Business game is made up of many variables which define a situation. This usually requires quick decisions and feedback and Also check the feedback immediately so that they can experience a near "hands-on" experience. These are usually used in the corporate world and use of computers is essential to enable participants receive instantaneous feedback based on their decisions.

The main features of simulation are:

* Simulations enable trainees to manage a complex situation with multiple variable with no or low risk.
* Involvement levels of participants are very high since they get feedback immediately.
* Simulations are targeted at people involved in operations.
* Designing simulations are quite a task but is a rewarding exercise.

**Critical Incident**

A critical incident is a brief and incomplete description of an actual event involving a problem/ issue to be discussed by the trainees, for learning how to get complete information of the event to be analyzed to understand the incident in question.

The main features of this method are:

* The trainer presents the incident in a few sentences and assigns a task to the participants.
* The trainer withholds some relevant information and provides only after trainees ask for it.
* The trainees gather complete information about the incident and analyze the information to verify whether their analysis is accurate with that of what actually happened.
* This method is targeted at those people who are interested in enhancing the problem solving and decision making skills.

**Multi Stage Case**

A multi stage case is a complete and authentic description of a real life situation presented in various stages as if the problem at stake, the characters involved the environmental factors was evolving through time.

Multistage case is characterized by:

* Presentation of a complex situation like a development project, right from the conception stage to implementation and evaluation in stages.
* The trainees virtually conduct a dissection and examine the decisions taken at various stages of the project/situation in question and their impact. They essentially comment on how the project in question must have been handled based on the information presented.
* Multi Stage case also enables the trainees to arrive at a solution and receive feedback on their solution from the original event.
* Multi Stage case is very close to the real life since it has all the elements of a real event and beyond all, the time dimension and its evolution brings in a lot of realism.
* It is targeted at people who are managing complex and dynamic situations.

**Advantages of Case method**

* A case presents a live situation and consequently grips the interest and motivates participants.
* Trainees feel relevance when cases are used because they reflect their work situations. This increases their involvement and puts them in the driver’s seat.
* Case method is flexible as it can be used on individuals and groups.
* Case method has several types which can be matched to the requirements of the audience.
* The feedback from the case method is immediate, which increases trainees interest.
* The trainees can work at their own pace.
* Case method is a highly participatory method and thus one of the best adult learning methods.
* All facts of real life can be presented in one case like processing a large amount of information, analysis, problem solving, decision making and evaluation.
* The case method leads the trainee to an active consideration of a tremendous number of diverse and related situations which would take the trainee a life time to experience.
* Case emphasizes on learning than teaching.
* Case method is effective in developing logical thinking, empathy, change in attitudes, values and beliefs, in trainees.
* Case method enables trainees to share experiences and knowledge and in the process improves their communication skills and team work.
* The communication flow in a case class is multi directional which is very stimulating to the trainees.
* For trainer, case method is a powerful research method.
* Case method does not require much equipment.

**Limitations of Case Method**

* Preparation of a case requires a great amount of research by the trainer and also requires sample resources like time and money.
* Preparation of a good case is an expert's job and requires considerable experience on the part of the trainer to prepare and also to administer the case in the class.
* The cases require constant updating and without updating they become obsolete.
* Cases are useful for an experienced group of trainees only as this method sharpens their skills and hence cannot be used for beginners.
* Cases, however clearly written may not provide a perfect replica of a true life situation.

**OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS**

There is another school of thought where the cases are divided into inductive and deductive cases. In inductive cases, the particulars/details of a case are given and by working from the details (by inductive thinking the trainees have to work out the theory or principles which underline the particular case. But in deductive cases the trainees are first given the general principles or norms and then by thinking deductively they deduce how these principles apply to the details/information given in the case.

**How to Conduct a Case Class**

The foundation of case method lies on the principle that individuals and the class as a group learn more readily as they take responsibility for conduct of case class discussion as compared to other training methods. In such a situation where the participants take the responsibility, one important issue for debate is, what should be the role of trainer and how he should conduct the class. There is no simple answer and this also depends on factors like the trainer's objective in using the case, willingness on the part of participants to accept the responsibility, contents of the case etc. The answer which emerges clearly from this debate is that conducting case class is a very good at this. I feel conducting a case class is infact more important than writing a case because even a mediocre case can be effectively run if the trainer is well versed but vice versa is not true. To facilitate easy discussion, this chapter is divided into the following subheads.

* What is case discussion.
* Ways to conduct case discussion.
* Approaches in handling a case class.
* Techniques of leading case discussions.
* Case Report.

**WHAT IS CASE DISCUSSION**

A case discussion is structured, creatively moderated and multidirectional exchange of facts, views, opinions and diagnostics solutions concerning a particular event or situation. Case discussion is a learning situation where the case is interpreted usually by group trainees in the light of their knowledge and experience on the subject. Learning takes place through a self-initiated and managed process of challenging the assumptions presented, feed back from other trainees, generation of possible alternatives and decision making.

The case instructor essentially shows the path without prejudicing the opinions/judgements of trainees and without dominating the discussion. The instructor enables the trainees to explore new ways of thinking and inquiry. The discussion at certain tinge shifts from specifics to general i.e. the participants start thinking how to apply the concepts learned when they face similar situation in real life.

Case discussion enables participants to define problem, generate potential solutions for the identified problem, try various options and zero down on best possible solution.

**WAYS TO CONDUCT A CASE DISCUSSION**

The following are the ways to conduct case discussion.

**Reading Case**

The case is distributed to the participants and the trainer may broadly explain the contents of the case, its objective and relation to the training program, provide guidelines on reading and analyzing the case and draw the attention of the trainees to the questions raised or tasks mentioned at the end of the case. The participants are then requested to read the case thoroughly before analyzing the case.

**Small Group Discussion**

After the individuals read the case, the trainer has to assign the trainees to small groups of four to five persons. The trainer must see that each group comprises of trainees of different backgrounds, experiences and attitudes to broad base the group and to generate a range of view expressed within each group which will improve the debate and discussion in the class.

* Assign trainees to small groups of 4-5 persons.
* See that group is broad based with participants from various backgrounds.
* After the individual studying is completed group discussion should be encouraged on the case.
* Trainer has to oversee group activity to ensure that group is clear about its task.
* Care must be taken so that no one dominates discussion and no one is left out.

**Varient**

Sometimes there is no need to have a group discussion when the number of trainees is small. The trainees are encouraged to prevent their views after they study the case, which the trainer should put them on the board for summing up. This method has an advantage where every participant would be invariably made to participate and avoids free loading of trainees which could happen in the group discussion mode.

**Plenary Session**

* Briefly present case and ask groups to present their views.
* Note the group views on the board/flip chart.
* Have discussion after groups present their views.
* Manage discussion so that all views are aired out clearly.

**Conclusion**

The case could be concluded in many ways like, no formal conclusive ending so that the participants are in a thinking state, concluding it open-ended with a challenging questions so that participants keep reflecting the problem, drawing clear cut lessons from the case and reinforce them with some theoretical inputs to reinforce learning, bring a resource person who actually is the case character so that the participants can compare their analysis with the actual happening. I either bring the actual resource person whenever possible or tell the participants what actually happened in the real case. In my experience as trainer, I found this type of conclusion brings a lot of satisfaction to the trainees.

* Do not end the case conclusively.
* Let participants be in thinking state eve after case discussion.

**APPROACHES IN HANDLING CASE CLASS**

There are four approaches in which a case class is handled. They are (i) Lecturing a case (ii) Theorizing a case (iii) Illustrating a case and (iv) Choreographing a case. Though each method has a role to play in the length of the case course, choreographing a case is the most effective from a learning point of view.

**TECHNIQUES FOR LEADING CASE DISCUSSION**

The following are a few techniques which would lead to effective discussion:

* Clear briefing to trainees before giving the case.
* Requesting for clarifications, interpreting jargons as participants study the case individually.
* The trainer needs to check with each group whether the task is clean and any clarifications are required.
* Rephrase what the trainee has said to see that the meaning is clear and to assist other trainee in understanding what is being said.
* Ask probing questions to expand trainees arguments. The questions must be neutral and not antagonistic.
* The trainer may give lecture for introducing the concept before the case is given, especially when the concepts are new.
* The trainer has to provide feedback to the trainees which influence the discussion in the class. If the trainer does not acknowledge useful contribution or acknowledge a casual contribution, there will be profound effect on the future contributions of the class. The trainer needs to be very careful and gentle in providing feedback and avoiding negative comments.
* Many a time the participants ask the trainers what is the correct answer for the problem. It is suggested that the trainer must never answer such questions, because the answer could bias the participants and may even stop their own analysis.
* Pausing is a very powerful technique available with the case instructor. When there is a silence in the class, it is better that silence weighs on the class rather than the instructor rushing to break the silence. Silence puts pressure on the trainees and galvanizes the discussion.

**LEARNING THROUGH CASE METHOD**

This note deals with four important aspects of learning through case method: -

* How to analyse and prepare for a case
* Before class small group discussion
* What is expected from participants during class discussion
* After class reflection

*I HOW TO ANALYSE AND PREPARE FOR A CASE*

There cannot be a standard formula for analysing cases. Each case must be handled as an unique situation. The approach that may be appropriate for one case may be inappropriate for another. However, certain guidelines can be followed in preparing for and learning through cases.

A prerequisite to analysis of many cases is an understanding of the language of trade. Marketing, for example, like most other fields, has some conventional terms and symbols of its own. Attainment of a familiarity with these terms and symbols in the process of working on cases is strongly recommended.

Each case poses an issue requiring a decision. Obviously decisions should be based on a sound grasp of the facts of the case. A vital first step in approaching any case, then, is to read and retread the case carefully. It is seldom possible to as similarly the facts in the first reading of the case. The first readings 15 useful primarly as a means of isolating leading issues and sketching the background. A second reading is generally necessary to fill in the details.

Throughout the reading of the case, the student should be constantly asking himself/ herself: what is the problem? What is the point (or Points) on which action is required? What has caused this situation? In many cases, the issue will be quite simple and direct; in others, it will be complex and obscure. In many cases, what seems like the issue on the first reading may upon reflection be only a symptom of some deepre, more problem.

This stage in the handling of a case is analogous to the physical diagnosing his patient's illness. He develops a hypothesis by observing a number of symptoms. As in a medical case, this stage of diagnosis in case preparation is crucial, for It in the diagnosis of the problem that recommendations for action will depend. Skill in diagnosis seldom comes from reading textbook it comes from repeated observation of actual cases.

Having diagnosed the central problem and its likely causes, the student is generally faced with several alternative courses of action. It is frequently useful at this stage to list all the possible courses of action. Then each option may be considered individually, and the implications and likely results examined. In this process, the effects of each action, not only upon the internal operations of the firm, but upon consumers, competitors, and the economy as a whole should be carefully weighed. Some alternatives may then be quickly eliminated from further consideration.

The case has now been read, diagnosed, and alternatives considered. This process may lead to reduction of the feasible options to two or three, all fairly evenly balanced.

It may be useful at this point to break down the central problem into a series of questions which require answers before any definite decisions can be made. For example, if the central issue is whether the company should add a new product to the line, a series of sub-questions may be developed, such as:

* What additional costs would be involved in adding the product?
* What additional revenues would it yield?
* Would the addition of the product yield more profit than some other use of the funds?

In addition, each sub-question could be broken down still further. For example, the sub-question involving additional revenues might be broken down further as:

* What would people use this product for?
* What advantages would this product offer them that existing products do not?
* Would these advantages be sufficient to induce them to buy it in preference to existing products?

At many points, no definite answers will be forthcoming to questions. Often sufficient information is not available in the case to enable the student to answer the questions. While this may prove frustrating, the student should realise that same is often the case in business itself. The vast majority of management decisions are made on the basis of incomplete information. Managers often do not have the necessary facts and cannot get them with the time and money available. They must make informed guesses, or even play hunches. Thus, while the case writer has attempted to include all of the information that was available to the manger, in many situations the desired facts were not known. In attempting to make do with limited information, the student will be experiencing some of the very real difficulties that face managers every day.

At this stage of analysis, and in spite of incomplete facts, the student should be nearing a decision. This is another crucial stage of preparation. It will often be tempting, where several alternatives seem closely matched, to put off the choice. If this is done, then the purpose of the whole learning from case method is defeated. It will often be, extremely difficult to make a decision, but a decision must be made. In business, indecision can be fatal. The most brilliant analysis in the world is of no avail if not carried through to action.

Action is the goal in all case situations. It will be well worth the effort to make a definite decision, no matter how difficult it is. Skill in decision-making like most other skills, comes only after hard practice.

*II SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION*

IIMA organizes (or suggests) a small group discussion as an additional step after the individual preparation and before the class discussion. The participants in a class are divided into several small groups for this purpose. In forming these different backgrounds and experiences. The assumption is that such a group would enrich learning of all members of the group because individuals with different backgrounds and experiences would probably view the same case situation with altogether different perspectives as well as with varying depths of analysis of specific aspects. Our experience indicates that the group discussion gives more satisfactory results in the management development programmes than in the post-graduate programme. Probably the post-graduate programme participant is afraid of sharing his/her analysis with others in a small group of peers because he perceives that in the ensuing class discussion he would be a loser in the quality of his class participation as someone else from his small group could use his ideas for his/her personal advantage.

*III WHAT IS EXPECTED IN THE CLASS*

With the case analysed and a decision reached, it is time to test the analysis in the crucible of the class.

The give and take of the class brings the case method to true fruition. Some students find this the most difficult step of all; some who are brilliant in their individual work become quite ineffective when called on to present and defent their thinking. The reverse also true, of course.

Management is not carried in a vacuum; it is run by people for people. The ability to communicate with others and to work with others stands high on the list of qualities necessary for effective management.

For these reasons, the class can provide valuable training quite aside from the training obtained by individual case study. It is certainly possible to attend classes merely to listen, but in doing so the student benefits neither himself nor his/her class-mates. Class participation is not only beneficial, it is the responsibility of all who undertake to study by the case method. He/she who cannot overcome this hurdle in a friendly setting faces a serious handicap when he sets out to cope with the problems of management in organisations.

As in so many practical management situations, the final decisions in a case are reached only after discussion among smaller or larger groups. "I have felt that each class, as Professor Copeland writes, "is in essence a practical experience in group behaviour and in the benefits of group discussions in arriving at business decisions. As a part of this process, but in part distinct from it, each class provides an experience in learning to listen to the views of one's peers and in learning how to express himself or herself and perhaps to persuade others to one's point of view. The method provides an opportunity to gain confidence in one's own judgement, but also a degree of humility as well. It also provides the most invaluable opportunity to dimensions of the problem and the extent to which judgement comes into play when many factors which have no common denominator must be weighed.

*IV AFTER-CLASS REFLECTION*

Another practice which IIMA uses in its post-graduate programme is to suggest to students to form a habit of "reflecting" on each case after the class. In courses where case method is the dominant vehicle for learning, the students generally get frustrated when they try to take inventory of what they "learnt" through a specific class (or set of classes). They also find it difficult to link up the learning from one case class to another, from one module of the course to another and from one course to another. Integration of learning becomes really very difficult.

The students, therefore, are advised to spend a few minutes after each case class for "reflecting” upon what he/she learnt from that case preparation, analysis and discussions.

The student can first take stock by reviewing his/her notes on the following questions:

1. What were the "issues" on which action recommendations were needed? (i.e What is the problem? What are the point(s) on which action was required?

2. What were the "critical areas" for action recommendations, where substantial analysis, significant marshalling of evidence and balancing of pro and con arguments were needed? (i.e., diagnosis, scanning of clues, prioritization).

3. What, therefore, were the critical questions which needed answers? (i.e., What has caused the situation? What favourable and unfavourable considerations could be observed or inferred? What final stand would you like to take in answering each question?)

After taking stock of the situation, the student can ask himself/herself the following questions:

1. What new or significant "concepts" became relevant and useful for analysing this situation?

2. How do I really get an indepth and comprehensive understanding of these new concepts and their managerial implications?

3. Is there any furthering of my learning derived from earlier cases which were analysed and discussed? In what way "learning" through this case is linked to learning from prior cases?

4. How does the "learning" from this case reinforce or contradict the "learning" from other courses.

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