

## CHAPTER 3

### LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: ON THE JOB OR CASE STUDIES

A very few leadership development programs use current on-the-job situations brought to the program by participants for discussion and problem solving. These “live” cases are the most beneficial to the participants in building their skills. More often, a case is a written description of a real situation used for discussion. There are also “arm chair” cases where an academic “dreams up” a situation to exemplify a particular concept or theory. These “arm chair” cases have very little use in effective leadership development programs because they seldom represent real life. Some education programs for executives use a lecture format with little or no discussion which this author considers of little or no value.

The more effective and pragmatic leadership development and MBA programs use the case method of learning in a manner similar to that used in law and medical schools. As Mr. James R. Bailey<sup>1</sup> observed,

“Cases are, after all, the zenith of deductive learning inasmuch as they supply complex situations upon which specifics furnish a springboard for generalities, complete with a glimpse into the untidy human and operational factors that are the rule in organizational life, not the exception. In this way, cases imbue a pedagogically structured experience based upon which sound practice is built.”

In this book, cases are accurate historic portrayals of actual, usually multifaceted, situations with which people in real organizations had to cope. A case may deal with the total organization or with a specific segment such as a branch office. Some cases may be concerned with overall, very complex policy problems such as diversification, merger, restructuring or human resources management. Other cases may focus on problems and issues dominantly in one or two functional areas such as interpersonal skills, organizational behavior, leadership, entrepreneurship, management of science and engineering and/or marketing. Most cases involve the use of linear, non-linear and contextual skills (see also Chapters 1 and 2) to some degree in order to analyze and reach a reasonable solution to the problems presented. Most cases parallel real life in that all the information the manager might like to have before making a decision is almost never available. The great strength of the case method in developing leadership skills stems from the fact that it forces one to take an active role in analyzing real organizational situations<sup>2</sup>. Further, it requires one to participate directly in achieving workable courses of action.

It might be added that there are no simple, sovereign, or “class” solutions to most case studies or indeed, to real on-the-job situations, but one can go from active experimentation in order to solve a concrete real or case problem to the formulation of

more basic principles. A useful guide to the problem solving cycle for real on-the-job or case situations would involve four interrelated steps from the Learning Styles Inventory by Kolb, et. al.<sup>3</sup>:

1. The encounter with a concrete set of experiences, that is the data in the case;
2. Reflective observation, that is standing back and assessing the concrete situation in a functional manner, neither making premature value judgments or fixing blame;
3. Abstract conceptualization of the problem, that is drawing upon one's experience and knowledge base of the relevant theories and concepts in order to place the data in a conceptual framework and put boundary limits on the problem; and
4. Active experimentation, that is developing and testing one's hypotheses, leading to making and implementing a decision.

The case method is a simulated experience that permits one to run through this four step problem solving cycle. It is the process of analysis, discussion and skill development that is paramount in the case method, not particular solutions.

The more useful interpersonal skill building cases are often described as a “slice of life”, since they generally contain all of the information available that the leader in the real situation or the case writer thought was important. These are generally written as if seen through the eyes of one of the individuals involved. It includes facts, opinions, biases and sometimes misleading information that the person in real life had to face. Everyone perceives with their own senses, which can be distorted. But, each one must deal with that perception even when it may differ from “reality”. Effective leaders learn to take account of the way biases, personality characteristics, expectations and previous experiences may distort data as well as opinions. Thus, one must learn to deal with case situations, as well as real life situations, through one's limited senses but fine tune one's senses to adjust for possible distortions. If a case in this book contains a statement in quotes, it is safe to assume that this is what was actually said. On the other hand, if a statement is not in quotes it should be assumed that this is what the person from whose point of view the case is written understood it to be and that this understanding may be distorted just as it might be in real life.

On the basis of the information presented in the case (or in some instances an on-the-job situation brought by a participant), each person analyzes the situation individually or in small groups, makes assumptions to provide for missing data, assesses the impact of biases and other distorting factors, examines alternative explanations for the behaviors described, deduces the limitations imposed by the environment and works out an approach which will provide a reasonable course of action to be taken under the

conditions as they are understood. Active class participation is necessary in the case method; the greater the participation, the more each participant gains from the perspectives, approaches, and proposed actions of peers and the more he or she adds to his or her non-linear and contextual skill base<sup>4</sup>. [In real life an astute observer can learn from the experiences of others by living vicariously the situation he or she is observing.]

In the case method the participant's role is transformed from passive observer, as in the lecture method, to active contributor. The instructor's role is transformed from lecturer to discussion moderator. As Christensen<sup>5</sup> observes: "A discussion class is a *partnership* in which students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching and the privilege of learning together." Each participant contributes to group understanding, responds to the contributions and arguments of others, and finally, learns to communicate with peers. This calls for effective listening skills as well as open-mindedness and receptivity to the ideas of others.

Ms. Julie Hertenstein<sup>6</sup> described participation very well indeed.

".... A good listener builds on the contributions of others, relating comments to, but not repeating, previous statements. When a question is asked, the careful listener answers it instead of moving in a different direction. He or she can support good arguments, challenge assumptions, point out inconsistencies, and probe weaknesses in the analysis. The careful listener knows when and how to synthesize and summarize the comments of previous speakers, and when to shift the discussion to new ground.

"In addition to listening carefully, students must present information effectively. They should identify important points, organize them logically, and state them succinctly while noting important assumptions. Students must provide supporting evidence and persuade others to accept their positions. They must be willing to answer questions, respond to criticism, and consider new evidence, modifying an earlier position when warranted. . . .

".... Frequent participation is not necessarily good, particularly if the student's contributions are mediocre. Infrequent participation is not necessarily bad; in fact, the most effective contributors are often students who carefully choose their opportunities. They avoid wasting "air time" on mundane comments; when they do speak, consequently, fellow students recognize that an important insight is likely and listen carefully."

In case discussions, as in real life, respect for all participants is an essential ingredient and precludes personal attacks which are disruptive and do nothing to further the acquisition of skills in any event. On the other hand, a quest for the acquisition of skills requires each participant to questions what is not clear or to challenge those arguments with which he or she disagrees. Each participant should analyze the situation,

adopt an explanation for the events that occurred in the specific environment in which they took place, evaluate alternatives, propose specific action steps, and present these thoughts during the discussion, but, each participant should also maintain an open mind as other data, explanations and proposals are made. Flexibility to revise the analysis and proposed actions is part of the learning process in the case method that adds to the individual's non-linear and contextual skill bases.

The aim of the case method is to increase the leadership effectiveness of each participant in his or her current as well as future job. But to increase effectiveness, each participant must positively change his or her behavior. Yet, Carl Rogers<sup>7</sup> observed, "the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning". Thus, through self-discovered, self-appropriated learning, the case method assists each participant -

- in developing better technical, human and/or conceptual skills,
  - in building better linear, non-linear, and contextual skills,
  - in detecting and adjusting for possibly distorted data,
  - in better understanding of themselves and others,
  - in nurturing their communications skills to better convey their own thoughts and decisions both orally and in writing,
  - in learning to listen more effectively, and
  - in improving their spontaneous and reflective responses.
- Spontaneous responses are instinctive and instantaneous while reflective responses are those which occur after thinking about the situation. (See Chapter 4.)

In this way each participant can, through their own efforts, acquire the skills necessary to make positive changes in his or her own behavior.

The instructor's role is that of discussion moderator, coach, mentor and partner. The participant's role is that of analyzer, presenter, listener, decision maker and partner. Herein lies a problem in the early stages of case discussion. People tend to search for the "correct" solution when, in fact, there is often no single correct solution to some problems. An important benefit of the case method is that in time, participants discover that there may be several ways to solve a given set of problems. They find that only the most thorough analysis applying the most relevant concepts and lessons from previous experiences leads to the more reasonable solutions. Therefore, the first requirement of case study is rigorous analysis and exploration of the problems and issues rather than concentration on a course of action. Case analysis is not a "quick fix"; it calls for a thorough understanding and evaluation of the facts, environment, perceptions, opinions, behaviors and interdependencies presented in the case.

Many cases are interesting because in real life the manager didn't grasp the multifaceted nature of the problems and issues or identified a few symptoms rather than the whole set of problems. Other cases are interesting because the "obvious solution", usually based on assumptions not validated, is only superficial and led the real life manager into trouble. Consequently, there is a requirement for thorough analysis, evaluation of the backgrounds and behaviors of the significant people, deduction of the limitations imposed by the environment, questioning of assumptions, consideration of alternatives, and a weighing of pros and cons of each possible action before deciding on specific actions.

One efficient way to prepare for a case discussion is to first read the case very quickly to obtain general impressions. At this stage, some questions should suggest themselves. In dealing with behavioral cases, one must consider the people involved including their experiences, biases, background, motivations, power bases, interdependencies, and roles in the organization. It is often essential to examine the "context" or environment in which the people are functioning including the way results are obtained, measured, and rewarded. By asking these and similar questions, one is starting to put one's self into the situation described by the case.

After having read the case once quickly, it is useful to read it again carefully. Many participants find a highlighter marker useful to identify more significant data for later review and further study. In examining behavioral cases one must be careful not to accept things at face value without considering other possibilities. For example, organization charts may not reflect status, organizational level, power, or the actual "lines" through which the organization functions. Many participants have found it very valuable throughout their preparation to bring to bear their own non-linear skills or knowledge of how organizations function, to listen to their judgment and insights for useful clues, particularly for subconscious behaviors, motivation or anything that does not quite "feel" right. The further in advance this preparation is done, the more time the subconscious mind has to process the information and thus yield the often critical insights. It is important to relate the theories and concepts one knows or has learned to the case data, and to look for interdependencies. One must examine in depth the people, environment and situations described. Although Levinson observed<sup>8</sup>, "we as adults are little aware of why we behave as we do", by carefully examining the background and behavior of the people and taking note of any biases or other influences which may be distorting their perceptions, we, as outsiders, may be able to deduce at least part of "why" people behave as they do. One should look for differences between the behavior described and the behavior that one would have expected given the case data and one's own experiences. Alternate explanations for these differences should be developed as well as an assessment of them. It may be useful in building one's contextual skills and understanding to think of the organization as a living organism of many interacting parts in order to see the interdependencies and environmental limitations in better perspective.

Other factors which may be important include: the work being done and the technology involved, the size of the organization and/or group involved, the informal and formal structure, the resources in both money and people, the strengths and weaknesses of the groups and individuals involved, and the organizational and/or group culture which is an important yet often overlooked factor. Organizational and individual objectives as well as any conflict between them may be important also.

There are a number of cautions to be considered in both oral and written case analyses and discussions as well as in real life situations:

1. Avoid overstatements, emotionally laden words, and premature value judgments that may cloud one's perceptions such as "he's a poor manager" or "she's always unreasonable".
2. Avoid dealing with broad generalizations or policy issues rather than the specifics in the case; for example don't say "management should ..." rather say "Ms. X should ...".
3. Avoid impractical statements such as "he or she should be more sensitive", that would require a personality change, or "the customer should not demand...", they do or will go elsewhere.
4. Don't be superficial; go beyond the obvious, examine alternatives, think carefully, look for clues or nuances that may suggest other approaches or directions to examine.
5. Avoid "quick fix" actions on "obvious" problems using "common sense" before thoroughly analyzing the case. Because the U. S. culture puts so much emphasis on short term results, it is all too easy, even for experienced and successful leaders to fall into this trap.
6. Avoid looking for who is to blame rather than trying to understand why people behaved as they have. In real life there are very few villains or heroes but rather good, well intentioned people doing their best as they see it with the tools they have. Focus on understanding the basis for what is described.
7. Avoid the temptation to "fire" someone, reorganize, or form a task force. These things may prove useful after analysis but are more often used as a means for avoiding needed analysis.

Remember, organizations, like people, are neither all good nor all bad. Look for what is strong as well as what is weak in the organization and in the significant people and groups described in the case. Remember also that in real life one has to deal with situations as one sees them and work through the difficulties one may face with the skills one has at the time. The case method helps to build and improve those skills. It is this process, including the case discussion, which offers each participant the opportunity to build his or her linear, non-linear and contextual skills thus laying the foundation for

improved interpersonal skills. It is analogous to getting into the water and thrashing about after reading a book on how to swim rather than relying on the book alone. One must have the experience of swimming to really know how. The “answers” derived from a case discussion are less important than the process used to get there. It is the process and the experience derived from it that lays the foundation for improved interpersonal skills NOT a focus on “correct answers”.

Malcolm P. McNair, when he was Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, captured the essence of the analysis required in an excerpt entitled, “Tough-Mindedness and the Case Method”<sup>9</sup>:

“William James, a great teacher of psychology and philosophy at Harvard during the early years of this century, made the useful distinction between people who are tough-minded and people who are tender-minded. These terms have nothing to do with levels of ethical conduct; the toughness referred to is toughness of the intellectual apparatus, toughness of the spirit, not toughness of the heart. Essentially, it is the attitude and the qualities and the training that enable one to seize on facts and make these facts a basis for intelligent, courageous action. The tough-minded have a zest for tackling hard problems. They dare to grapple with the unfamiliar and wrest useful truth from stubborn new facts. They are not dismayed by change for they know that change at an accelerated tempo is the pattern of living, the only pattern on which successful action can be based. Above all, the tough-minded do not wall themselves in with comfortable illusions. They do not rely on the easy precepts of tradition or on mere conformity to regulations. They know that the answers are not in the book.”

Many people find it useful to get together in small groups to prepare cases. Working with a group of compatible people may improve one’s analysis and understanding of the case, however, the group is not a substitute for individual responsibility. Group work may sharpen the awareness of the serious participants, but it does not help those who wish to coast. One doesn’t develop one’s own skills by watching others develop theirs. Finally, whether preparation is done individually or in a group, one should build on what others have contributed, but be sure to add to the discussion. People get from the case method only as much as they put into it. After all, it is each participants linear, non-linear, and contextual skills that are being built or not built and interpersonal skills cannot be improved without this foundation.

A case discussion may start with the identification of the significant problems and issues or the significant data and/or the background of the significant people. It may then center around the way different participants have analyzed the case and the basis for the differences. Conclusions may be derived and finally, the discussion may end with action recommendations. The role of the instructor during the discussion is that of moderator but as Glover and Hower<sup>10</sup> have noted, “On occasion (usually when asked) he/she will

put forth ideas of his/her own; but he/she will do so with the explicit understanding that his/her ideas are to be scrutinized, discussed, criticized, accepted, or rejected with the same freedom that is accorded those of anyone else in the class—even the wisest instructor has no monopoly on ideas.” Thus the instructor is a partner in the process of acquiring skills but is NOT an “expert” as might be the case in the lecture method.

If you are preparing a written analysis, make it easy for the reader. Begin by defining the problems and issues you think are significant and indicate why you think they are significant. Then present your analysis of the case data as concisely as you can. Use the theories and concepts you have learned to explain what has happened and reach conclusions about the problems and issues you have identified. The length of the analysis may be minimized by attaching a highlighted copy of the case study with appropriate references in the analysis to show the reader what data was thought to be significant. Some readers may prefer this data integrated into the analysis. Ask the reader what is preferred. Finally, make specific recommendations concerning who should do what, when, where, and how to solve the problems and deal with the issues.

Many different theories and concepts may be applicable to any case. It is seldom that any single theory or concept will appear vital to every participant, just as it is difficult to find any case which is of vital interest to every participant. This does not reduce the importance of the theory, concept, or case as a part of the total program. It may be that you will find most of the material intriguing, or that only some of it will be so. Whatever your reactions, there are valid reasons for reading all of it, but with varying degrees of thoroughness, depending upon your current knowledge, interest, and needs.

Since most seminar time will be devoted to case discussions, it is essential that all cases be analyzed thoroughly. The concept chapters contain the theories and concepts for which all participants will be held responsible. The time it is necessary to spend on each chapter will vary greatly depending on your prior knowledge and experience, the complexity of the material, its relevance and your interest. Some concept chapters are included for information or historical perspective; to let you know that something is available, or that people are writing in a particular field or how that field has evolved. Some chapters are intended to be provocative, not definitive. Some should aid in gaining understanding of a situation, an idea or a concept already presented. Others should be read for general information, still others for content which will help in analyses of specific problem areas and/or to make decisions based upon the theory or concept presented, but not all concept chapters will find application in the cases.

Some chapters and cases will be given different interpretations by different readers, again based upon their own knowledge, interest and needs. Many, but not all, of the concept chapters are included to be of use with the cases. The theories and concepts covered frequently facilitate understanding some of the case issues or provide an

analytical framework which can help you establish a viewpoint toward the case. The choice of time and effort spent on each chapter and case is yours.

### **Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion**

1. How are the roles of student and instructor different in a case discussion compared to a lecture?
2. What is good participation in a case discussion and how can it be evaluated or measured?
3. What can each participant do to maximize the probability of improving their interpersonal skills and on-the-job performance?
4. What are the differences and similarities between understanding another person's background and personal characteristics and "stereotyping" that person?

## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Bailey, James R., "The Case of the Resurgent Case", Academy of Management Learning and Education, December 2002.
  - <sup>2</sup> Christensen, C. Roland, Teaching by the Case Method, Harvard Business School, Boston 1981.  
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Andrews, Kenneth R. (Ed.), The Case Method of Teaching Human Relations and Administration, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1953
  - <sup>3</sup> Kolb, David A., I.M. Rubin, and J.M. McIntyre. Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach. ("Learning Styles Inventory") 2nd Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974.
  - <sup>4</sup> Sternberg, R. J., Beyond IQ: A Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence, Cambridge University Press, NY 1985.
  - <sup>5</sup> Christensen, C. Roland, David A. Garvin and Ann Sweet, ed. Education for Judgement: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1991.
  - <sup>6</sup> Hertenstein, J. H., "Patterns of Participation", in Education for Judgment, edited by C. R. Christensen, D. A. Garvin and A. Sweet, Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1991.
  - <sup>7</sup> Rogers, Carl R., On Becoming A Person, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston 1961.
  - <sup>8</sup> Levinson, Harry, "Fads, Fantasies and Psychological Management", Consulting Psychology Journal, Winter 1992.
  - <sup>9</sup> McNair, Malcolm P., The Case Method at the Harvard Business School, McGraw-Hill, NY 1954.

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<sup>10</sup> Glover, John D., and Ralph M. Hower, Some Notes on the Use of the Administrator, Richard D. Irwin, Homewood IL, 1950.