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**THE CASE STUDY METHOD IN TRAINING AND MANAGEMENT
EDUCATION**

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THE CASE STUDY METHOD IN TRAINING AND MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Key words: *Case study, Case method, Training methods*

Abstract:

The case study is a method which provides descriptive situations which stimulates trainees to make decisions. The purpose of the case method is to make trainees apply what they know, develop new ideas to manage a situation or solve a problem. The focus is more on the approach the trainee uses rather than on the solution. As a training tool the case study method can be used to developing decision making skills, enhancing team spirit, better communication and interpersonal skills as well as strengthening analytical skills of trainees. This article explores the situations when case study method can be used a training tool and also explains the advantages and limitations of this method. It also describes certain variations in the case method so that the trainer can enhance his effectiveness.

“How can I be more effective?” This is one question, which every trainer asks himself. The basic techniques that a trainer uses are the theory and skill sessions, the discussion and the lecture. The trainer must first of all ensure that he gains adequate mastery over these basic training skills. Once the trainer can use these techniques with confidence and skill, he can move on to use some advanced techniques. Some of the other advanced techniques are the Case Study method, Role-plays, In-baskets and Simulation exercises. This article explores the utility of using the Case Study as a training technique as well as the necessary preparations the trainer must make for it. It also explains the situation when a Case study can be utilised and what precautions the trainer must take before he/she utilises the Case study method.

Trainers are aware that there is no single method to make training sessions successful and effective. The trainers’ understanding of the various methods he uses in different contexts result in a more interesting and different way of influencing trainees to participate and learn.

However even before the trainer decides on using an advanced training technique, he/she must be ask herself/himself the following questions:

- Are trainees motivated enough to involve themselves in such advanced techniques and to put in the additional effort to participate?
- Case Studies require a much more matured participation because it is less structured compared to other techniques. Do the trainees possess such maturity?
- Does the technique seem to satisfy the objective of the programme? Is the method compatible with the objectives?
- Is the method appropriate for the size of the trainee/student group?
- Does the method require that the trainees/students already possess certain background knowledge or skills?
- Is there ample time? How much time does it take for the trainer to prepare and then use it in the training session? Do the trainees and the trainer have that kind of time in the training session?

- Does the training method demand certain special skills from the trainer? Does the trainer possess these skills?

The factors which influence choice of the training method are the training needs of the organisation, of the trainee and the current job/task that he is performing. The training method adopted must be relevant to the trainees, the objective of the programme, as well as the place and time where the training will be conducted. It is therefore essential that careful selection of the training method must be done resulting in motivating the trainees, help them learn and to apply what they have learned at the workplace. It must also help them to enhance their performance by integrating what they have learnt to their existing skills and knowledge.

The objective of this article is to highlight the utility of the Case Study as a training method .It also provides certain guidelines which would help in the necessary preparations that the trainer must make if he would want to utilise the Case Method in his sessions, ideal situations when the case method can be utilised as well as when to avoid it. This article is the outcome of the experiences of the author as a trainer over two decades.

The Case Method:

Michiel R. Leeenders, Louise A. Mauffette-Launders and James Erskine defined a case as “a description of an actual situation” and explain that it usually involves a challenging situation or a dilemma which requires analysis of the situation and the environment and leads to decision making.ⁱ Researcher Robert K. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.ⁱⁱ

A case study is a documentation of events and situations which have occurred in an organisation or in a business .These events or situations are sequentially reported and there is also a description of how the person/s concerned reacted to the situation .Case studies

report events as they have occurred, with no judgemental opinions of the author, and thus stimulates the reader to think from his own perspective. The way in which the managers have responded to the situations or events are documented and this allows the reader to analyse the facts and make a decision. The most interesting case studies generally allow the reader to empathise with the key character in the situation and respond to a dilemma or a challenge. The case study does not focus on getting the right answer; in fact there never is a single right answer for the case unless it is a mathematical problem. Emphasis is laid on the manner in which the solution is arrived at, the deliberations involved and the practicality of the solution. The case study was first used in the field of law and medicine but the credit for popularising the case method in management education goes to the Harvard Business School way back around 1910. It has been an established instructional method for a century. Today it is used widely in management education, employee training and even as a selection tool. McKinsey for example has clearly identified that the case study analysis forms a primary method of evaluating people on decision making skills and analytical ability and thus employs it as a crucial selection tool.

While the case study and the case method are often confused and the terms used interchangeably, they actually are not the same thing.ⁱⁱⁱ A **case study** is a story about a situation or event that contains a problem or issue, usually a real situation. The case study usually contains information about the problem PLUS information about how the situation was addressed, and the results of the actions taken to solve the problem. The **case method** also presents a situation or problem space, and need not be taken from real life. However, it does not tell the learners "what was done", and neither does it provide any solutions at all. It is up to the learners to generate possible solutions that might fit the case facts.^{iv} The latter is more involving for learners, and forces them into proactive problem solving rather than the former where it is considered as a post mortem sort of analysis. However for this article the case study and the case method have been used to mean one and the same and cover both the real situations as well as the simulated/fictitious ones.

TYPES OF CASES:

There are six types of case studies as based on the framework provided by Datta (1990),^v though this classification is more related to using the case study as a research tool.

1. **Illustrative Case Studies** are descriptive; they utilize one or two instances to show what a situation is like. This helps interpret other data, especially when there is reason to believe that readers know too little about a program.^{vi}
2. **Exploratory Case Studies** are condensed case studies, undertaken before implementing a large-scale investigation.^{vii}
3. **Critical Instance Case Studies** examine one or a few sites for one of two purposes. This method is particularly suited for answering cause-and-effect questions about the instance of concern.^{viii}
4. **Program Implementation Case Studies** help discern whether implementation is in compliance with its intent. These case studies are also useful when concern exists about implementation problems.^{ix}
5. **Program Effects Case Studies** can determine the impact of programs and provide inference about reasons for success or failure.^x
6. **Cumulative Case Studies** aggregate information from several sites collected at different times. The cumulative case study can be retrospective, collecting information across studies done in the past, or prospective, structuring a series of investigations for different times in the future.^{xi}

The typology of case studies given below would probably be more apt when classifying case studies from a training methodology perspective. These types of case study include the following^{xii}:

Illustrative Case Studies

These are primarily descriptive studies. They typically utilize one or two instances of an event to show what a situation is like. Illustrative case studies serve primarily to make the unfamiliar familiar and to give readers a common language and understanding about the topic in question.

Exploratory (or pilot) Case Studies

These are condensed case studies performed before implementing a large-scale investigation. They can be used to indicate to the trainees the way things are, i.e. to serve as an indication as to what to generally expect.

Cumulative Case Studies

These serve to aggregate information from several sites collected at different times. The idea behind these studies is the collection of past studies will allow for greater generalization without additional cost or time being expended on new, possibly repetitive studies.

Critical Instance Case Studies

These examine one or more sites for either the purpose of examining a situation of unique interest with little to no interest in generalizability, or to call into question or challenge a highly generalized or universal assertion. This method is useful for answering cause and effect questions.

Cases prove valuable in a course/training session for several reasons.

1. The case method allows the student or the trainee to gain the feeling of experiencing situations and events first hand. It allows the trainee to empathise with the protagonist and “put him in the other people’s shoes” A sense of personal experience of the managerial situations or dilemmas which the student would have not had the opportunity of experiencing is the biggest advantage that the case method has as a training tool.
2. As compared to other methods, the case method allows the trainee to assimilate better what was taught because the relevance of the of the information becomes more realistic when they learn through case studies

3. Since case studies allow people to work and learn in a team, the case study method is very useful when it comes to imbuing a sense of team spirit amongst the trainees.
4. After the team or the individuals read and analyse the case, they are given an opportunity to present their views and analysis to the class/group. This makes the case study ensure interaction and active participation of the trainees/students in the session. The case study method therefore helps in improving the communication skills as well as the interpersonal skills of the trainees/students.
5. The student/trainee steps into the shoes of the manager faced with the decision-making situation or the dilemma, thus prompting them to understand the ambiguity and complexity faced in most management issues.

Commented [s1]:

When is it apt to use a case study?

Trainers often use case studies to build skills in analysis and problem solving. Case studies have to be given in a written format to the trainees since it includes lots of related and seemingly unrelated information, facts and figures about the company. The trainee either individually or in a team is supposed to examine the case based on various factors like people, environment, financial and physical parameters. Case studies as a training technique can be used for managers, executives and students alike as long as it fits into the available time. Used in graveyard sessions (as post lunch sessions are called), they can enliven the training programme and can also be used as a take home assignment if the training programme is residential. The case study method emphasizes on approach to see a particular problem rather than a solution.

The focus of a case study therefore will be to

- Facilitate the trainees to develop decision making and analytical skills
- Develop the communication and interpersonal skills of the trainees
- Enhance the managerial skills of the trainees

- Assimilate knowledge about procedures and strategies.

So whenever the objective of the training programme is any of the above, the case study method may be used.

Commented [s2]:

When should we avoid using the case study?

Utilising the case method can be an enjoyable experience for both the trainer and trainee. But unless the trainer has used cases earlier, it is likely to find that he/she will need to develop some new skills. So the trainer must be totally confident that he has such skills.

If the trainers have not been exposed to the case method earlier, chances are that they may find it difficult to motivate the group to work together and come up with a solution/analysis. Similarly trainees who have not worked together as a group earlier may find it uncomfortable to interact with each other. If the trainer is not confident that he can motivate trainees to work together or create an environment which stimulates group working, then the session may go wasted.

Further some trainees may not feel at ease in such methods, especially if they are shy and nervous individuals. Such a session which involves role – playing and decision making may only add to his becoming more uncomfortable. In such situations, when the trainer feels that the group may not be comfortable with such interactions, it is best that the trainer avoids using the case method.

Commented [s3]: <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/projects/casemethod/guidelines.html>

Case studies look at events with a view of ‘what was done’, and what was done need not be the right thing to do every time. Further, students don't have to make personal decisions so there is no sense of accountability. Students tend to give vague and unrealistic solutions to the issues in the case, since they feel “it’s just a case” and therefore we have nothing to lose. The trainer has to therefore take precautions to ensure that this does not happen as the case analysis is going to take up quite a bit of training time.

Variations.

Keeping in mind the extensive benefits of the case study as a learning tool, trainers and academicians have further innovated with the case study method. Innovations may be in terms of how and when it is used, the supplements it is used with and the activities preceding or following the case analysis.

1. Video based case studies

In this method, a short film /video related to the session is shown and based on that a discussion is conducted. For e.g. as a trainer when I conduct sessions on vision building for managers, I use a short video film based on the life and work of Dr. G. Venkatswamy called the “Infinite Vision”^{xiii}, as a base to start of the interaction on how a vision for an organisation can be developed. Sessions on Leadership and Motivation can be very effective when we use video based case studies.

2. Internet based case studies

This variation is similar to the above method, except that the instead of the video shown to the participants, they are given several URL or Internet links to websites from which they draw the information required. However this method though extremely interesting and invigorating, has two major drawbacks. The first being the fact that the amount of information gleaned from the internet may be different from person to person and thus have an impact of the analysis of the case .The second is that, unless it is a company website, the URL containing the information may be moved or deleted. But if these drawbacks are taken care of, then the Internet based study is one of the most interesting variations of a case study.

3. Case studies followed by role playing

In this variation, the trainees are required to pick out a situation from the case study and enact it as a part of the analysis or may be asked to enact out their analysis of the case. The role play allows the participant to don the role of the person in a given situation, think accordingly and enact it .It adds a behavioural perspective to

a business situation. Role plays are more useful when the objective is to impart learning in areas of communication, etiquette, leadership, negotiation and team building.

The role play helps the trainee to develop awareness of how people behave in certain situations .It also gives them a firsthand experience of how to handle difficult situations like conflicts, negotiations , by literally allowing the trainee to “be” the person /protagonist portrayed in the case. It helps individuals understand the attitudes of the other persons and allows him to develop acceptable attitudes .In short it sensitizes the trainee as to how others would act and react in a given situation.

How to make the case study more learners centric?

Some of the major drawbacks of the case study may prevent them from becoming effective training methods .They are:

- If the case study is be too general, it may prevent the trainees from focusing on a specific issue.
- The author of the case study usually allows his judgmental opinions to lurk in the case .These perceptions which are usually felt by the readers distort their (the trainees) feelings and may lead them away from making objective decisions.
- Cases which are based on fictional people, situations and organisations may be too idealistic and seem distant from reality.

In order to evince participation from the trainees/students the case study should be:

- Realistic and relevant to the roles that those participants are actually playing in real life.
- Involving practical events or situations that had or could have happened so that the participants could relate to them better and it can help in transfer of learning.
- Have situations where there could be divergence of thoughts and opinions, so as to create an opportunity for discussion.

In short there should be enough information to make the case realistic to the learners, and enough information so that learners can try to solve the issue without requiring further information.

“As with any instructional method, learners will learn more effectively if the leader or trainer "primes" them by explaining the method, and preparing them to be full participants.”^{xiv}

Evaluation of Trainees/Students performance through the Case Study Method.

The performance of the group of trainees or individuals in the discussion and analysis of the case study provides us important vistas to evaluate them on various skills like leadership, analytical thinking, decision making and communication. **(See annexure 1 for sample case evaluation format).**

There can be no single answer for a case study; neither can there be a right or wrong answer. The solutions can be evaluated on the basis of how practical it is, what the consequences of implementing this solution could be .Case study analysis must not focus on the symptoms of the problem but the root cause of the problem and the consequences it has had on the firm, the group or the individual. It could also spring up discussions on how this situation or problem could have been avoided. While for students, focus could also be on the conceptual models they try to understand and apply in analyzing the case. The case study therefore allows both an introspective and a retrospective analysis of the situation. When used as a group exercise, various group forces would also be evident, the aspects of group think^{xv} and group shift^{xvi} could come to the forefront. It also allows for teamwork and divergent thinking. Groups therefore could be evaluated on such parameters also.

Conclusion:

The case study therefore is a realistic training tool which allows high involvement and participants by trainees and participants. It is a collection of information surrounding certain situations, either real or imagined, and gives an opportunity to trainees to analyze

what has happened, why it has happened and what are the possible implications. It allows the participant to go into retrospective mode to analyze if the crisis (if any) could have been avoided and how. The case study method also gives the trainee the scope to recommend solutions based on the given information

The drawback however in this method is the amount of time it could consume, realistic cases are rare and difficult to pen. It also requires that the trainer is very creative and knows how to steer the discussion the right way.

The trainer has a wide variety of training methods which he can utilize, however it is necessary that he keeps in mind the time available the training environment, the training objective as well as the type of trainees. Trainers usually combine two or three methods and often come up with innovative variations to suit their needs. Some trainers practice and develop one trademark method which distinguishes them from others. Ultimately, what matters is not just the means, it is important that the training objective is achieved.

Sample scorecard for evaluation of performance in Case Analysis :

PARAMETERS	MARKS/ SCORES/ GRADES	Team Code Or Persons name	Team Code Or Persons name	Team Code Or Persons name
Presentation Style How effectively and interestingly facts and figures were presented. Was the information well organized and presented in a logical manner.				
Application of Principles Has the group made effective use of class principles/ models & theories and have properly researched the topic	This parameter may be avoided if the trainees are not students.			
Analytical Soundness The group properly analyzed the problem and have articulated a well-developed strategy				
Confidence - ability to answer queries clearly and in a composed manner				
TOTAL				

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- ^{xii} <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/casestudy/com2b1.cfm>, accessed on 06/01/11 at 11.50 a.m.
- ^{xiii} Video is available on <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-430943131005128104>, and <http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=74> as well as several other sources.
- ^{xiv} <http://www.thetrainingworld.com/faq/caselearn.htm> .accessed on 13/02/11, 10.20 p.m.
- ^{xv} Groupthink occurs in groups when individual thinking or individual creativity is lost or subverted to stay within the comfort zone of the consensus
<http://www.expertprogrammanagement.com/2011/03/groupthink-examples-avoidance/> accessed on 16/02/12, 12.04 p.m.
- ^{xvi} Group shift. It indicates that in discussing a given set alternatives and arriving at a solution, group members tend to exaggerate the initial positions that they hold. In some situations, caution dominates, and there is a conservative shift.
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