What Makes a Good Case?

Derek Abell, Professor, IMD Lausanne, and Professor at the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne DEREK ABELL, Professor at IMD, at the ETH Zurich and at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, was Dean of IMEDE from 1981 to 1989, and a member of the Harvard Business School faculty from 1969 until 1981. Author of many cases on marketing and general management, he has considerable experience in executive teaching and learning, using participative methods. Currently, he is heading up the alliance between the two Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology and IMD to develop research and teaching at the interface between technology and management. This article is based upon a speech prepared by Derek Abell for the Annual CEEMAN Case Award Ceremonies, held in Prague in October 1996. Professor Abell is a Board Member of CEEMAN (Central and East European Management Development Association).

Case writing is both art and science. There are few, if any, specific prescriptions or recipes, but there are key ingredients that appear to distinguish excellent cases from the run-of-the-mill, i.e. those of which, after the class, the participants will say, "I really learned from that discussion", and, equally important, from which the professor learns too! Here are ten ingredients to look for if you are teaching somebody else's case—and to look out for if you are writing it yourself.

1 Make sure it is a case and not just a story

In a case, there usually is, explicitly or implicitly, a managerial issue (or issues), to be confronted. Often, the issue has to be defined, or clarified, through participant discussion before it can be addressed. Sorting out the wheat from the chaff, getting to the essential issues, and learning to ask the right questions, are key objectives in case teaching.

A case also differs from a story in that the participants can put themselves in the shoes of one or more of the managers portrayed in the case. And, like bait for a fish, a good case really needs a hook—to get the participant excited enough to take a bite and, with the bite, eventually to swallow the larger (and perhaps immediately less evident) issues and perspectives hook, line and sinker. A hook can be a minor problem which leads to a much greater problem in the case, or it might be a very specific example of a more general issue hidden in the background. Whatever form the hook takes, it serves to initiate a more extensive process of debate, resolution and generalization.

2 Make sure that the case tackles a relevant, important issue

The case must tackle an issue that is of central importance to the particular class audience in which the case is to be used. This suggests that there must be a fit of the case with the audienceï£¡s educational needs, and needs in practice. There is no point in writing cases about trivial issues. Pick something that is meaty and significant for whatever level of executive or student you have.

One good way to ensure this relevance is to keep permanently two lists as a constant reminder of relevance: first, a list of case leads, and second, a list of case needs. Ten to twenty items on each list is sufficient. If this is always kept updated, you will have the luxury of picking one or two intersections where new cases can and should be written. Thus, you will not get distracted by leads that deal with irrelevant issues, or needs that do not fit your particular teaching priorities.

3 Make sure that the case provides a voyage of discovery—and even some interesting surprises

Good cases are like onions—the more you peel away the outer layers, the more you discover inside. Thus, the headline problem may not be in fact the real problem. As we often find in consulting assignments, what executives tell you is the 'main' problem is often only symptomatic of more fundamental ones. For example, we have all heard many times sales and marketing executives tell us how difficult it is to get a 'fair price' for their product or service. As we know, the odds are that the real problem is not pricing, but probably either that significant value has not been created for the customer or, if there is value, it may not have been properly communicated.

Such problems behind problems can often create an important element of surprise for the participants. Another way to create surprise is to suddenly force participants to consider themselves in a role other than that which is featured centrally in the case, for example to be asked to put themselves in the shoes of the general manager's boss, or one of his key subordinates. Changing roles in mid-stream in this way forces the participant to consider broader new perspectives.

The concept of a case as a voyage of discovery also tells us something about case writing as a research tool. While a single case may provide a lot of insight, a series of cases around a common theme may provide several contrasting voyages of discovery, and thus building blocks for a research design. In this way, teaching material development and research become one and the same.

4 Make sure that the case is controversial

It is very difficult to have a good discussion when there is little to debate or contest. Good cases are those where one set of data may lend itself to different interpretations, different judgments, different decisions, and, consequently, different actions. For example, a case dealing with the management of growth may well raise controversy about the positive and negative impacts of such growth. It may be good for market share but bad for short-term cash generation. It may suit the CEO with respect to his relationship with the Board, but be very uncomfortable for line managers further down. Reaching decisions requires, therefore, more than simply the analysis of data. It requires the application of both values and judgments, in addition, of course, to rigorous analysis. In other words, intelligent people can differ with respect to decisions, and particularly controversial decisions. Only when assumptions are tested and clarified, which is the purpose of case discussion, can directions and actions be decided which account for these differences.

Some of the best cases are those where consensus among the participants is gradually developed in the classroom, to the point where there is a strong movement in a certain direction— followed by new questions which fundamentally challenge such a consensus. Just as in a rodeo when the bulls are running full speed toward the exit gate, only to find that it is slammed shut in their face, the sense of disorientation and frustration forces reconsideration and eventually learning. Often, of course, participants will continue to batter their heads against the concrete wall, and display an unwillingness to reconsider positions, even when confronted with new ideas and arguments. But this kind of persistence, while good in some ways, is usually then challenged by other participants who have shifted their opinions. This kind of controversy creates learning at many levels—not only substantive learning, but learning also with respect to listening, and with respect to communication and persuading others.

5 Make sure the case contains contrasts and comparisons

Some of the best cases stimulate learning through displaying very different situations, strategies, behaviors, etc. A good marketing case, for example, may allow the participant to contrast buying behavior in two very different segments of the market: a good international business case might allow the participants to compare the market realities in two very different countries or regions.

One of my favorite classic cases on leadership graphically describes two very different types of general manager: one, Fred, a well-manicured, well-dressed, well-organized, type A manager with a daily agenda which includes one appointment after another from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.—highly successful in his business; the other, Renn, a somewhat overweight, jacketless, tieless, Mediterranean general manager who, when his secretary is asked how his agenda looks for the day, gives the answer: “It is almost empty, as usual.” He responds by walking off down the corridor to discover with his team at several levels down what the day and the future has in store for all of them. Interestingly, he is highly successful too, and the discussion of the case and its companion video helps the participants to reflect on a variety of leadership styles, and their effectiveness in different situations. This leads them naturally to reflect on their own style, and its effectiveness.

Contrast is not only a good teaching tool: it is a good research tool, too, so that good case writers with a research eye develop an instinct for looking for differences and contrasts.

6 Make sure the case provides currently useful generalizations

By necessity, a case usually addresses the issues facing a specific manager, in a specific industry, in a specific geographic setting. But participants, of course, are interested in whether there are more general lessons or concepts to be drawn from the specific case and how these concepts can be applied to their situation. A case gains significance, therefore, to the extent that such generalizations are possible, and cases should be sought out and written in such a way that there are some generalizable concepts.

This does not mean that there are precise similarities between one situation and another. On the contrary, good case teachers are always asking the question, “What is the same here and what is different?” But discovering a way to look at a situation is a more important teaching objective than solving a specific problem. Good cases therefore should be written in such a way that the participant is forced to ask the right questions, rather than necessarily to give the right answers. Answers are seldom generalizable; questions can be.

Why ‘currently useful generalizations’ and not just ‘generalizations’? We make this distinction because we want the participants to have a sceptical view of a generalization; to use it but not overuse it. We want the concept to be a way of entering the debate, and opening up questions, rather than providing a watertight result. In fact, one of the biggest difficulties which participants and executives alike typically face is to develop a recognition that there are few tools which can be applied to complex managerial issues—especially as we advance from analysis to action. Participants like tools and ask for tools, and they are frustrated when they are told there are few tools. Tools would be comforting, but the reality is that the ‘currently useful generalization’, sceptically applied, is an important tool (in a more meaningful sense of the word) of competent management.

7 Make sure the case has the data required to tackle the problem—not too many and not too few

A good case should be able to stand alone in the sense that a teacher other than the case writer can take the case without special inside knowledge, and teach it. Some case writers assume that they will bring to the classroom their own insights, and therefore leave essential material out of the case. This makes the case impossible to deal with. So what do we mean by appropriate data? Essentially, these are of three types.

First, there should be enough description in the prose of the case itself for the participant to be able to situate the case problem, and understand the various issues that bear on the problem. Therefore, we need a description of the product or service, technologies involved, the way the product or service are produced and distributed, and what is really required to do well in that business. We also need to understand the broader setting in which the particular business operates. Depending on the issue at hand, this might mean understanding the industry more broadly, changes in the industry, and forces which are at work behind these changes. A lot of this can be described in prose, and it should always be crisp and in plain English. Students should not need to be experts to understand it and, if your son or daughter could not understand it by reading it, it is probably inadequate. Giving a past, present and future perspective to such a picture of a product, industry and its broader environment, is almost always useful. Few decisions can be made at a particular time without having a broader historical context, and at least some ideas about what might happen in the future.

Secondly, alongside these prose data, and often contained in exhibits at the end of the case, or judiciously positioned in the text, are more quantified data. Almost all cases benefit from having well-presented financial statements, and some essential data about growth rates, breakdowns of various parts of the business, etc.

Thirdly, good cases often need descriptions of the people involved, since understanding individualsï£¡ predispositions, positions in the organization, values, and relations to others, is an important part of the decision making, and even more important part of implementation. Quite often, companion videos, which allow the participant to 'meet' the people involved in the case face-to-face, bring the case to life.

Good cases have neither too few, nor too many data. As easy as it is to leave out essential data needed to have a good discussion of the issues, it is equally easy to make the mistake of stuffing the case with data which are not needed. This makes the case unduly difficult to read, and confusing for the participants. While the case should provide a sense of discovery and surprise, there is no excuse for ambiguity and confusion.

By far the best way to assure that the data in the case correspond to what is needed, is to write the teaching note in parallel with the case. A good case writer, after his or her first visit to the organization, will draft out the headlines of the case and, at the same time, draft out the headlines of the teaching note. Only by setting the case teaching objectives, and prioritizing them, can we decide what to put in the case, and what to leave out. Thus, a good case writer always has in mind how it is going to be taught, how the class might unfold, and what conceptual learning one wants to leave at the end.

8 Make sure the case has a personal touch

I have already hinted above that good cases bring people into the foreground. A case that just has numbers and facts, but nothing about the organizational setting in which the issues are being confronted, feels sterile. Participants are more motivated when they can imagine the realities of the situation in terms of the people involved, as well as the issues involved.

What does this mean in practice? It suggests that quotations drawn from executives are often useful. It suggests that organizational processes, as well as boxes on the organizational chart need to be described, and it suggests that informal, as well as formal, mechanisms in the company, need to be understood.

As suggested above, video material and, even better, attendance by the actual executives involved in the case, is always appreciated. I like them to sit at the back unintroduced, at least for the first hour or so of the discussion—which creates an additional surprise factor when they are invited eventually to tell how it actually was from their own experience.

9 Make sure the case is well structured and easy to read

This sounds self-evident, but many potentially good cases do not succeed because of poor structuring and poor prose. There are no recipes for this except to keep in mind that good case writers have to be, as a point of departure, good writers. The old adage (apparently attributed to Voltaire) that “I am writing you a long letter, since I did not have time to write you a short one”, is still worth reflecting on with respect to structuring a good case. Well-structured and well-written cases usually go through at least half a dozen drafts to ensure crispness and clarity. Many case writers like to redraft the case yet again once it has been taught a couple of times, and deficiencies have surfaced.

10 Make sure that the case is short

Participants have difficulty reading and absorbing more than eight to ten pages of text. Exhibits may be additional to this, but probably another five to ten pages with a well-laid-out exhibit on each page is maximum. Many classes are populated by participants who do not share the same mother tongue, so this makes it even more imperative to keep it short and succinct. Some of the great cases are not more than five pages long, yet able to generate outstanding discussion and learning.

Cases, like many other things in life, should be short and sweet. In fact, the former is a key ingredient to the latter.

What Makes a Good Case? is available from ECCH using the reference number 397-119-6.