

Case study: Mock GD

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Time Limit: 25 minutes

Assume that you are the Manager of a goods packaging factory of one of the prominent and leading B2B (Business to Business) organisations. Being in the goods packaging business for more than 20 years, your organisation has developed promising and effective business relations with its suppliers and consumers/clients. Paper is one of the essential and largely used entities in the production of packaging materials for most goods. One of your regular paper suppliers is a foreign-based reputed firm. The firm has been associated with your business for the past 15 years. They have been selling world-class paper rolls to you at reasonable prices. Their paper quality is high and reliable and they have been delivering the products on-time. However, most of your competitors in the goods packaging sector/market buy similar paper products from local vendors in India, which manufacture their paper in small scale units. Their quality standards are low and the order lead time is usually quite variable. Their charges are, however, much cheaper and non-standardised.

Now, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, your regular supplier is facing a lot of issues in transporting the paper supplies to your factory due to a halt on the import-export business. They are taking much more than the usual delivery time and have increased their prices upto 150% due to the higher transportation and delivery charges. They are, however, working in compliance with the government laid norms and ensuring all possible safety regulations for their staff and for the delivered products. On the other hand, the local suppliers are delivering orders in cheaper rates and within usual lead times, but the quality and reliability of orders are unclear and not trustworthy.

Being a B2B firm, your organisation is also facing difficulties in sustaining the supply chain and meeting the net product demand. The lockdown situation has given a further hit to your production as only 20% staff is being allowed to work in the factories. Over that, you are also facing enormous challenges in delivering the manufactured goods to your own consumers. In order to meet the sales demand, you have to manage the factory and its working on your own and ensure that the production continues at an even greater pace. However, you realise that your regular supplier is facing difficulties in delivering the products to the factory on-time and is also charging more. You have to make a choice to stick with your regular supplier or shift on to a local vendor. Come up with an optimal solution to the problem and discuss the consequences.

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In the town of Bokaro in Jharkhand, lived a poor man with his wife. He used to work in the coal mines under extreme conditions of poor lighting, degraded air and water resources on-site, low wages and high workload. He was the sole breadwinner in his family. He usually suffered from respiratory problems and breathlessness owing to prolonged work hours in the suffocating conditions of the mines. His breathing problems increased, but the family kept ignoring the symptoms and decided not to consult any doctor owing to the expensive medication fees and additional expenses. Soon, the health conditions of the man started degrading severely, and he experienced frequent vomiting, sometimes even with the traces of blood. He, on the advice of his fellow mine workers, finally consulted an old man in the nearby villages, known for his ayurvedic treatments. He started various home-made remedies as suggested by the old man, but his condition showed no improvements. One day, he felt severe chest pain and blood vomiting. He fainted with his illness. His illiterate wife, in a situation of shock, helplessness, and fear, called for help, but most of the neighboring mineworkers had gone for work. She was not aware by the procedures of calling the ambulance and decided to carry her husband to the nearest Government hospital, on her own. A kind person on the way judged the situation and called for an ambulance. However, there was severe traffic on the road due to some car accident, because of which they got late. When they reached the hospital, the hospital administration asked for completing the formalities before admitting the person. The doctors recommended preliminary medicines that were unaffordable for her to get. She had no money with her and the process got even delayed. When they finally arranged for some money, the man was admitted to the general ward. He was diagnosed with a critical stage of Lung cancer. The unhygienic conditions and lack of proper facilities at the hospital limited the efforts that the doctors could have made and they were not able to save him.

Now, analyze the situation and the associated context and arrange the following in the order of being most responsible for the death of the person-

- The workers' administration
 - The hospital administration
 - The traffic police
 - Coal mine workers
 - The old man (who provided the Ayurvedic treatments)
 - Wife of the person
 - The person himself
 - The doctors
 - Government (State/Central)
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How to approach a case study based Group Discussion
Tuesday, February 4th, 2020



The process of a case-study group discussion is almost similar to that of a [topical discussion](#) in that there is a preparation time of about 5 minutes, the panel starts the discussion and observes the discussion without moderating it, and the group is at complete liberty to understand, analyse, and interpret the case as it deems appropriate in order to make a recommendation.

There are however 2 key differences.

The first is that instead of an opinion-oriented or a descriptive topic, the participants are given a case statement, which they must read so as to prepare within the given prep time a basic response, which allows them to give their perspective on the problem at hand.

The second, and more important, difference is that unlike the conclusion of a topical GD – in which the panel does not expect a particular outcome – the ideal conclusion of a case-study discussion already exists in the minds of the panellists. They expect you to arrive at it, or at least near it.

Therefore, a topical GD is similar to a ‘free-response’ question, whereas a case-study GD is similar to an ‘objective’ question.

The cases invariably feature a business problem, but often have a social, a personal, or even a political dimension(s) that must be taken into account while solving the problem, and part of the evaluation involves testing the participants' ability to understand the problem in all its complexities.

Case studies are usually of two types: Those in which the group must make a decision, and those in which a decision has already been made and the group must discuss and determine whether the decision is 'right'. The former is the norm and the latter, an exception. The former, in my opinion, is much easier than the latter because it is always easier to devise a solution of your own than to evaluate that of someone else, who applied their own evaluation criteria which you must first infer and compare with your own. Luckily, only in the rarest of cases do we get to see the latter type.

The Six Steps of Approaching a Case-study based Group Discussion

A participant must approach the case by NOT beginning their thought process by impulsively thinking of what solution would best answer the question that follows the case, for we cannot solve a problem that we do not fully understand. Rather, I recommend the following steps:

Step 1: Situational analysis

Step 2: Problem definition

Step 3: Statement of objectives

Step 4: Evaluation of alternatives

Step 5: Recommendation

Step 6: Plan B, if any

Let us understand these steps by examining a famous caselet that I have often referred to in my sessions.

"A software engineer is hired as a trainee by a company that specialises in hardware. As the end of his mandatory training period approaches, his job performance is found below par, and he is informed that he must leave the company at the end of his training period. His immediate superior, out of kindness, writes him a recommendation letter, which may help him in getting the next job. However, this engineer uses the letter to take the company to court and challenges his dismissal.

How should the company resolve this situation?”

I recommend that before you read further, try to answer this question in your own way, and then compare your thought process with what follows.

You can also see [Group Discussion Tips – How to approach a topical Group Discussion](#)

Step 1: Situation Analysis

Some case studies are as short as the one above, or they could have a long case statement that runs beyond 20 to 25 lines. With case studies, it is usually easier to deal with the longer ones than the shorter ones, as the shorter the statement the lesser the data, and the more the number of assumptions we need to make in order to proceed towards a solution.

Please remember that in a case study you – both the individuals and the group – must solve the problem from the perspective of the entity in the question at the end of the case statement – in the above case you are ‘the company’. Nobody is allowed to role-play in such discussions. However, you should certainly examine how the given situation affects all the concerned parties.

Situation analysis, contrary to what usually happens, should not begin by a word-by-word repetition of the case, as every participant is familiar with the case details. If the first person to speak in the discussion does this, he or she will be quickly silenced by someone louder who wants to enter the discussion, even if the latter has very little to contribute.

Instead begin analysing the situation by asking the questions about what we do not know about the situation, and what assumptions we need to make in order to solve the problem.

For example, is this recommendation letter personal (made on the basis of a personal relationship) or professional? Has it been issued on the company letterhead? The facts definitely point in that direction.

Therefore, the assumption we need to make is that this is a professional recommendation, and hence potentially damaging to the company.

Was the superior aware of the potential consequences of his action?

We cannot necessarily assume that he was, as he may not have received appropriate training. Would that mean that he is not responsible? Certainly not.

Why was a software professional hired in a hardware company?

We cannot necessarily assume that there was a need or a perceived future need of a hardware professional at the time of his appointment. His appointment may have been a result of factors other than his qualifications or the company's requirement, factors such as nepotism.

Who are the parties directly involved in this problem? The employee, the superior, the company management, the court.

Who are the parties indirectly involved in this problem? The rest of the company staff, the shareholders of the company, and the general public. The potential court case and its proceedings will eventually affect the first two, and the third's perception of the company may also be affected by a potentially lengthy and publicised court case.

Observe what we are doing here. We are not trying to hijack the discussion by the usual "I think the company should..." kind of beginning. We are trying to understand the situation better. Unless this is done, we cannot go to step 2.

Step 2: Problem definition

This is the most important stage of the discussion. If the situation has been analysed properly, we can not only see all the inherent problems but also determine the order of priority in which they must be dealt with.

Problem 1: What to do with the court case? We cannot merely wish it away. This is priority number 1 because it involves a factor superior to us and hence one we do not control: The court.

Problem 2: What to do with the superior? His error in judgement – it could very well be deliberate – has brought the company into trouble.

Problem 3: How to ensure that such an incident is not repeated in the future? This re-examines two processes: recruitment, and recommendation.

It is important to agree on the order of priority so as to ensure that all participants are on the same page, and the limited time is most effectively utilised.

Step 3: Statement of objectives

What do we hope to achieve out of a range of solutions we are going to discuss? Where will we absolutely not compromise, and where we might? This must also be determined in the order of priority.

Objective 1: Whether the case proceeds in the court or not, we are not going to retain the candidate in our employment. Any solution we agree on must achieve this.

Objective 2: Whether the case proceeds in the court or not, we must minimise the damage that may be caused to the company's reputation both within and outside the company. The achievement of this objective is conditional on the fulfilment of objective 1, e.g. if we retain him in our employment, all problems will be over in a minute, but that is not in the best interests of the company or the employee.

Objective 3: We must take appropriate steps to ensure that such an incident is never repeated.

Step 4: Evaluation of Alternatives

You must have realised by now that discussing a course of action is not really possible without a proper discussion on step 2 and 3. You are always going to solve only those problems that you have identified, and only up to an extent determined by the objectives you have set out for yourselves.

Most participants will have their own perspectives on the case in Step 1. However, from step 2 onwards, there needs to be a clear agreement among the group members. The 'leader' of the group must achieve this, and ensure that the discussion does not start at step 4.

If the discussion starts directly at step 4, it cannot end in anything but chaos. Any course of action must always be weighed against the objectives in the given order of priority.

I am not going to suggest any alternatives to the above case! I leave that to you.

Step 5: Recommendation

Upon discussing alternatives, the group may make a unanimous recommendation, or the opinion may be divided. In case of such division, a majority recommendation is made to the panel. The group is under no obligation to come to a consensus. The panel is primarily interested in how logical the participants are in their execution of Steps 1, 2, and 3. First I need to see if you can understand the problem. Solving it comparatively easier (if you have identified it correctly).

Step 6: Plan B

Actually, it is plan B, C, D, E, F and so on.

What I mean is the panel does not expect a one-size-fits-all kind of solution. The panel expect you to identify all possible scenarios in which the case may end, and have a plan of

action for each. Therefore, a case-study should ideally end like this: If A happens, we will do X; if B happens, we will do Y, and so on till you have identified all that can possibly happen.

In order to successfully solve the case, all 6 steps must be rigorously followed. It is a completely logical process. Take one step out of it, and the discussion will collapse like a computer program without one crucial digit.

You can also see [Group Discussion – Definition, Tips, and other rules to follow](#)

In Summary

Do not deviate from the 6-step process.

If the rest of the participants deviate, it is wiser for an individual to keep trying to bring them back to the process than to deviate with them. The panel will notice that you tried to approach the task methodically, and did not abandon logic in the midst of chaos. That is a BIG positive.

The case can be solved only if the entire (or at least the majority of) the group works together. Work in the spirit of the team, but do not forget that the team spirit does not mean that you blindly follow the majority of the team.

You must have realized that to understand a problem in all its complexities, you must be able to observe it from the points of view of all the concerned parties. In order to be able to do this – both now and in the future – cultivate empathy within yourself. Develop a habit of putting yourself in the shoes of others and feel what they feel.

Nobody said it more eloquently than Aristotle: “To perceive is to suffer.”
