Developing Cases

– A V Vedpuriswar

In the earlier issue of Case Folio, we provided a general overview of the case method of discussion. We saw that the case method can be a powerful pedagogic tool for subjects where quantification is difficult and qualitative judgments are involved while making decisions. If used properly, the case method can impart great learning to students. On the other hand, if not handled well, case teaching can result in frustration for both students and teachers.

The first step in ensuring that students and teachers enjoy the case method is to ensure that the case is well written. A badly developed case will end up confusing the students instead of imparting knowledge. One way to ensure the quality of the cases is to license them from reputed sources like Harvard Business School (HBS). Unfortunately, licensing is expensive and can cost on an average $5-6 per case. So, B Schools, which are committed to the case method of teaching, must make efforts to build cases inhouse.

In this article, I share some of the insights I have gained in case writing over my five years of association with ICFAI's Case Development Unit (CDU). Readers may be interested to know that ICFAI's CDU has now developed more than 200 cases. The team employs several faculty members and young research associates who work round the year to develop cases. Indeed, this magazine has been designed around the steady stream of cases developed by the CDU each month.

In general, there are two types of cases - library and field. Library cases are developed using published sources of information. Field cases are written on the basis of actual field visits and interviews of industry executives. Many academics argue that only field cases are of any real value. We at ICFAI disagree with this view. Very often, published sources supply more vital and useful information than can be collected from a hurriedly done field trip. Moreover, an enterprising business journalist who has been covering an industry or a company for a long time will provide more unbiased and incisive information than company insiders. In any case, barring aside B Schools like HBS, who have phenomenal resources and access to senior executives of large corporations, only library cases are within the realm of practical possibility. And even in HBS, a significant percentage of the cases developed are based on library work. In the remaining part of this article, we concentrate on the development of library cases.

The topics for case development should be selected carefully. Some important considerations are involved here. The topic should be contemporary to the extent possible and about which there is a high level of awareness. Adequate coverage of the topic must have appeared in the business press, ideally over a long period. This is necessary to trace the development of the situation covered in the case. The topic must evoke interest among the students and have enough scope to encourage them to take different positions while discussing the case in the class. An open and shut type of situation will kill the discussion very early on. This is obviously not desirable.

A standard template in developing cases is to start with the present situation where a problem or a few problems have to be tackled. Then, a background note of the company or the industry can be provided. The next section should go deep into some issues directly pertinent to the problems faced. The case should conclude with the various options available. Students can then debate these options in the class and decide which of them is the most feasible.

A good case will revolve around a couple of key ideas and provide in-depth information related to these ideas. So identification of the ideas to be covered is the first step while writing a case. What are the ideas to be covered in a case? While an exhaustive list cannot be provided here, I provide some illustrations. Take a merger situation. Some of the key themes are valuation, synergies identified, post merger integration and finally (if the merger is reasonably old), to what extent the shareholders of the acquiring company have benefited. Or consider a case on corporate governance. Among the key issues are composition of the board, the role played by the board in overseeing the management of the company, powers delegated to the CEO, succession planning, disclosure practices and depth of senior management talent. Similarly, a case on marketing can cover one or more elements of the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion), details on competitor strategies and an overview of the industry in which the company operates. A Human Resources case can focus on themes like hiring, retention, training, performance appraisal and compensation. An Operations Management case can deal with issues like plant layout, production scheduling and quality control.

A point to be kept in mind is that the very nature of a case makes an inter disciplinary approach unavoidable. So, cross-functional issues must be covered. However, to the extent possible, the focus should not be diluted and excessive digression from the main theme should be definitely avoided. In general, each case should be given a different tilt to give it a unique flavor depending on the subject for which it is prescribed in the curriculum.

A case written in a simple, narrative style will keep the class engaged. Otherwise, it may be too drab or too heavy and fail to sustain the interest of students. To keep the case interesting and light, conversations and quotations should be included to the extent possible. In library cases, conversations cannot be incorporated. So, quotations must be liberally used.

A careful selection of the quotations is extremely important. They must be value adding. Preferably, only senior executives who matter in the organization should be quoted. Where a quotation is not very striking in its language or expression, it is always preferable to use our own words. Moreover, quotations should not be too long. If used well, quotations can build interest in the case and convey different positions, which cannot be taken by the case writer.

The inclusion of important protagonists with their profiles and style of management will bring the all-important human dimension to the case. Consider a case on Sony or GE. Profiles of colorful personalities like Akio Morita or Jack Welch would make the case much more interesting.

At the end of the day, a case should have learning value for the students. So, the case writer should put himself in the shoes of the teacher and carefully examine whether the case is sufficiently rich in information and can be used to teach some important concepts. Wherever there are gaps, additional information should be incorporated.

Having completed the case, one should edit carefully. At least 7-8 rounds of editing are recommended. The following checklist will be of great help during the editing process:

- Are there some important lessons for the students?
- Is enough information provided for students to take positions and discuss the case in the classroom?
- Are all the facts presented accurately?
- Have references been given to quotes and factual information?
- Has the case writer biased the reader with his or her own views?

In the next issue of 'Case Folio' we shall take up some specific situations and understand how cases can be developed.

A V Vedpurishwar is Dean, Icfaian School of Management (ISM), an affiliate of the Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts of India, Hyderabad.

Characteristics of a good case

A good case often provides a wealth of data in the form of exhibits. Superficial reading may not reveal the importance of these data. The students need to appreciate that while decision-making is often an intuitive process based on incomplete information, actions without any data to back them can at best be an effort to grope in the dark. The data given in the exhibits should back the action plan suggested by the student. Further, data pertaining to other functional areas must also be studied. For instance, in a case where marketing of a product is a key issue, relevant costing data may be vital. In some cases, the data given may have to be converted into a different format to aid analysis. For instance, from the given profit and loss statement and balance sheet, the student may have to work out financial ratio analysis. Similarly, from the total sales value and volume figures, the Average Price Realization, which is an important parameter in marketing, can be calculated.

What is a case?

A case study describes typical administrative issues or problems confronting a manager in an organisation. Ideally it is taken from real life. It is usually presented from the standpoint of the decision maker involved.

Problems may be stated, though not always explicitly. The case author will provide supporting information about the business, its environment and the circumstances surrounding the problems.

A case is used as an educational vehicle. It gives students the opportunity to place themselves in the position of the decision maker. Therefore a successful case is one which offers debate on alternative courses of action, rather than offering a single "correct" outcome or solution.

Teaching by the case method is particularly valued for its ability to introduce a close simulation of reality into the classroom. It generates high levels of reasoning, involvement and group participation by students.

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