Developing Cases

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In the Economic Times Learning Curve dated January 21, 2002, I explained some of the subtle nuances involved in case discussions. In this article, I shall discuss the key issues involved in writing cases. I will draw upon the insights I have gained in case writing over years of association with ICFAI's Case Development Unit (CDU). It has more than 300 cases to its credit.

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 field visits and interviews of industry executives. Many academics argue that only field cases have real value. This view is not entirely correct. Very often, published sources supply more vital and useful information. Such information may not be easy to collect even after a time consuming 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 top institutions like Harvard Business School (HBS), who have phenomenal resources and access to senior executives of large corporations, only library cases are within the realm of practical possibility for most B Schools. And even in HBS, many of the cases developed are based on library work. In this article, we shall focus on the development of library cases.

The starting point in case development is selection of the topic. It should be contemporary. There must be a high level of awareness about the topic. It must be able to evoke interest among the students. There should be enough scope for students to take different positions while discussing the case in the class.

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 can go deep into some issues directly pertinent to the problems faced. The case can conclude with the various options available to solve the problem. Students can then debate these options in the class and select the one which is the most feasible.

A good case will revolve round a couple of key themes and provide indepth information related to them. So the themes to be covered must be selected carefully. What are the themes to be covered in a case? While an exhaustive list cannot be provided here, a few examples are in order. Take a merger & acquisition case. Some of the key themes could be valuation, synergies identified, post merger integration and finally (if the merger is reasonably old) the share price movement since the time of the merger. In a case on corporate governance, the key issues would be 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 quality of senior management talent. A case on marketing can cover one or more elements of the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion), competitor strategies and an overview of the industry in which the company operates. A Human Resources case on the other hand can focus on themes like hiring, retention, training, performance appraisal and compensation. Likewise an Operations Management case can deal with issues like plant layout, production scheduling, quality control, procurement and maintenance practices.

A point to be kept in mind is that the very nature of a case makes an inter-disciplinary, cross-functional approach unavoidable. However, in the process of covering various aspects, the focus should not be diluted. 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 flavour, depending on the subject for which it is prescribed in the curriculum.

A case written in a simple, narrative, absorbing 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, quotations should be included to the extent possible. A careful selection of quotations is extremely important. 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 one's own words. Moreover, quotations should not be too long. If used well, quotations can build interest in the case and inject the element of drama. Quotations also enable positions to be taken, without directly involving the case writer.

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. At the same time, a case should not be too long, (around 15 pages).

Having completed the case, one should edit the text carefully. Atleast 7-8 rounds of editing over a period of 6-8 weeks are recommended. The following checklist will be of great help during the editing process:

1. Is enough information provided for students to take positions and discuss the case in the classroom?

2. Are all the facts presented accurately?

3. Have references been given to quotes and factual information?

4. Has the case writer biased the reader with his or her own views?

5. Are there important learning lessons for the students?

Case writing is as much an art as a science. A well written case will provide a rich learning experience to students. And that is the ultimate reward for a teacher with commitment.

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