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9B18M053

student guide to the case method: note 1—UNDERSTANDING the case method

Susan J. Van Weelden and Laurie George Busuttil wrote this note solely to assist students with understanding and using the case method. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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A *case* or *case study* is a real business story that requires you to step into the role of a manager or a member of the management team that faces a dilemma, or the role of a consultant assisting an organization that faces a dilemma. Acting in that role, you are tasked with resolving the issues or problems that the profiled organization is facing at a particular moment in time. Alternatively, you are asked to evaluate and choose among opportunities that exist for the organization at a specific point in time. Those issues and opportunities may be confined to a specific discipline in business, such as accounting, marketing, human resources, or strategic management. However, the challenges often involve several disciplines, reflecting the multi-faceted nature of business in practice.

The case method involves learning by doing. It provides you with an opportunity to apply your knowledge and skills to real-life and realistic situations. Listening to class lectures, reading about various business subjects, and performing quantitative and qualitative analyses to solve well-defined problems are all valuable learning tools; however, management skills and knowledge cannot be developed by these methods alone. Management requires more than applying a storehouse of prepackaged solutions or standard answers. Each situation faced by management has its own variables unique to the situation. Using the case method provides you with valuable opportunities to develop and practise skills you will need in those situations.

1. INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING THE CASE METHOD

This note introduces you to the case method. It provides an overview of the steps used in case analysis and the types of case assignments you might encounter. It is designed to help you develop a basic understanding of the case method and to guide you in approaching your first few cases. Subsequent notes provide more detailed guidance about individual steps in the process.

1. purpose of the case method

Case analysis is used as a teaching and learning tool to *practise the art and science of management*. The situations described in cases are less structured than the typical problems and questions found in most textbooks. There is not necessarily one right answer to resolving the issues, problems, or opportunities (collectively referred to hereafter as “issues”) faced by the organization in the case. While some answers could be better than others, there is no answer key at the back of the book to tell you whether you have made the right choices.

The organization described in the case might be familiar to you, and you might even be able to find out what the organization actually did in the situation described in the case; however, the approach taken by the organization is not necessarily the one you should recommend. Also, because cases describe relatively current or recent situations, enough time might not have passed since the decision point in the case to allow you—or others in the business world—to evaluate whether the organization made the best possible choices. You are asked to draw your own conclusions and support them with your own analysis.

Learning with the case method will help you develop essential management competencies, skills, and abilities. You will use technical, analytical, problem-solving, and creative skills. You will hone your written and oral communication skills by writing reports, participating in class discussions, and making presentations. You will develop your ability to work effectively with others by preparing team case reports and presentations.

Along the way, you will learn about a wide variety of industries, organizations, and management issues.

1. reading a case

Before reading the case itself, read the course requirements in the syllabus or on the course website. In addition to understanding the general purpose of the case method, it helps to know what your instructor wants you to do with the case—prepare for a class, answer questions, perform a complete analysis, prepare a written report or presentation, or undertake some combination of those tasks.

When you read the case for the first time, resist the temptation to highlight important facts and to begin doing analysis and generating alternative solutions. If you use a highlighter on the first read, you will soon find yourself highlighting most of the case, especially in a short case that is rich in details. Instead, during the initial read, establish who the decision maker is and what decision needs to be made. Highlight any questions raised by the principal actors or characters: they usually indicate what work is expected (e.g., answers to specific questions, specific types of analysis, or evaluation of specific alternatives). Identify key goals of the organization, industry key success factors (if they are made explicit), and important constraints (e.g., the urgency of a decision, or the lack of resources or expertise). Develop a preliminary understanding of the issues facing the decision maker.

Then read the case more carefully a second time. Armed with an initial understanding of the issues, you are now prepared to assess the relevance and importance of specific case facts. Highlighting the case facts at this stage will help you to be able to quickly extract them and use them effectively in your analysis. During your second read of the case, you can also gain a better understanding of the issues and begin to consider what analysis to perform with the case facts you have identified as relevant and important.

Subsequent reads of the case will likely be confined to rereading specific sections of the case as you undertake the analysis described briefly in Section 3 and described in more detail in Note 2 of the Case Guide Series—“Performing a Case Analysis,” No. 9B18M054.

1. analyzing a case

Over the course of your business studies, you will face a variety of cases. Most of the cases will be in written format, but cases can also be provided as videos. The length of cases will vary, as will the breadth and complexity of issues they cover. As well, some cases will direct and limit the scope of your analysis, while other cases will pose general questions that require a more skilled approach to case analysis.

Regardless of the size and scope of the case, case analysis involves four basic steps:

1. Identify the issues, problems, and opportunities.
2. Analyze the issues, problems, and opportunities.
3. Develop and evaluate alternative solutions.
4. Make recommendations for action.

Especially for complex cases, a case analysis is usually an iterative process. While an essential first step is to identify the issues to be resolved, analysis of those issues can refine the issues that were initially identified, leading to a revised issue statement.

1. scope of the case guide series

This note and others in the Case Guide Series are designed to provide an overview of the case method. They provide a general template or pattern for case analysis that you can apply in various courses throughout your business studies. There is no one right way to analyze a case, just as there is no one right answer or solution to the issues presented in a case. You will encounter a variety of situations, issues, tasks, and topics that all require you to use judgment in applying the guidelines provided in the Case Guide Series.

The Case Guide Series covers five separate tasks that can form part of your case assignments.

**Case analysis:** For all case assignments, you will be required to analyze the case by performing one or more of the steps described in Section 3 (i.e., identify the issues, analyze the issues, develop and evaluate alternatives, and recommend a course of action). *Analyze*, in the broad sense, refers to the full process of applying the case method. *Analyze* can also specifically refer to the case analysis step of probing into and dissecting issues. In both contexts, analysis is a critical component of the case method, so it is discussed first and receives the most attention. (See Note 2—“Performing a Case Analysis,” No. 9B18M054, and Note 7—“Common Tools for Case Analysis”, No. 9B18M059.)

**Class discussion:** In some courses, instructors will use discussion of the case to apply and supplement the lecture material; in other courses, instructors will use discussion of the case as the main pedagogical tool. To benefit from the discussion and to provide meaningful input, it is important to adequately prepare. (See Note 3—“Preparing to Discuss a Case,” No. 9B18M055.)

**Report writing:** You could be asked to prepare a written case report—either individually or as part of a small team. For this task, the emphasis is on organizing your analysis and findings in a written report that effectively communicates those findings to the reader. In most instances, you will be asked to play a specific role (e.g., the internal manager who is the decision maker in the case or an external consultant to that decision maker), and to write a report to a specific reader or group of readers (e.g., the vice-president of marketing or the board of directors). (See Note 4—“Preparing a Written Case Report,” No. 9B18M056.)

**Oral presentation:** You could be asked to present your analysis and findings to the class, either individually or as part of a small team. The goal in this exercise is to develop and deliver a concise presentation that captures the main thrusts of your analysis and presents them in a professional and engaging manner. Here, too, you will usually be asked to play a specific role and to present to a specific target audience. (See Note 5—“Making an Oral Case Presentation,” No. 9B18M057.)

**Case exam:** Your instructor might use the case method as a testing or examination tool. The goal in this situation is to showcase your analytical and writing skills under the time pressure of an exam setting. It will be important to read the case intentionally so that you can isolate relevant facts and data, identify issues, decide on the appropriate qualitative and quantitative analytical tools to use, and perform the necessary analysis. Time management will be crucial so that you can complete all required steps, including providing appropriate recommendations and a plan for their implementation. (See Note 6—“Preparing for and Writing a Case Exam,” No. 9B18M058.)

***When completing any of the above tasks, follow the specific instructions provided by your instructor in the course syllabus or course package.*** These specific instructions always supersede those contained in the Case Guide Series. Different instructors have differing expectations, which is good practice for the workplace, where you will need to give careful consideration to the preferences of your supervisor or client—in terms of both content and style.

1. case analysis and academic integrity

Because case analysis is complex, it may often seem helpful to discuss the case informally or formally with other students before participating in a class discussion, writing a report, or making a presentation. Managers and consultants often discuss problems with other people, within the constraints allowed by confidentiality. ***Therefore, your instructor may allow, encourage, or even require such discussion. However, to ensure academic integrity and to avoid plagiarism, unless your instructor has specifically indicated that some degree of discussion is permissible, you should consult with your instructor before engaging in any collaboration.*** This restriction on outside discussion is especially necessary when preparing reports and presentations.

It may also seem helpful to search the Internet for teaching notes for cases or for case reports or slide presentations prepared by other students. Academic integrity requires that you refrain from using such resources, in full or in part. Any attempt to use the work of others and to pass it off as your own is plagiarism. If the instructor is suspicious that plagiarism might be involved, you may be asked to upload a copy of your case report through Turnitin.com.

While using the work of others may appear to provide a shortcut to a good grade, the quality of online sources and the work of other students is often suspect, at best. Most importantly, you deprive yourself of the learning opportunities the case method offers.