Case Analysis Methodology

Case analysis and "reading" a situation described in a case is an iterative process. True, knowing the facts of the case is important and reading the case attentively a few times is usually a good way (along with highlighting and keeping notes) to achieve this. However, case analysis also requires *active* reading whereby you think as you read and as you read you change and clarify your thinking by looking for further evidence that supports (or contradicts) your thoughts and opinions. This cannot be achieved through a mere cursory reading of the case.

As you read, separate the objective facts (e.g., sales figures) from subjective impressions expressed by actors or players in the case (e.g., "The VP sales felt that production was not keeping up and thought that the Director of Production was not being cooperative."). Listing and then considering objective facts will help bring clarity to your analysis. However, subjective elements can never be removed from the equation and can help you nuance your analysis by enabling you to appreciate important organizational and/or inter-personal dynamics.

Typically, most cases are "self-contained" and therefore rarely necessitate "outside" research. As you read the case, keep in mind that a complete case analysis should cover the following five components and ask yourself what facts are relevant to each component:
- o problem statement/issues identification;
- o analysis;
- o identification and evaluation of alternatives (with clear criteria);
- o recommendation and rationale (where your clear criteria will become handy!);
- o plan of action (think of key hurdles to implementation) including proposed evaluation or control measures.

According to William Ellet, author of *The Case Study Handbook: How to Read, Discuss, and Write Persuasively About Cases* (2007, Harvard Business School Press), cases typically deal with one of four situations: 1) actual problems, 2) decisions, 3) evaluations, and 4) rules. Cases are usually written such that the type of situation is laid out clearly. Once you have identified the type of situation, you still have to clarify it and articulate it in a concise and clear statement.

PROBLEM STATEMENT / ISSUES IDENTIFICATION

State the problem clearly and succinctly in one or two sentences. This will require you to boil the case down to the key issues or decisions facing the actors involved in the case. The problem statement should be decision- or action-oriented. It should NOT be a mere recitation of the facts of the case. Assume the reader of your analysis is familiar with the facts; only use the facts to support your arguments. If the case involves more than one problem or issue, make sure to clearly prioritize them. One way to approach this is to put yourself in the shoes of the key decision maker(s) and ask yourself what would be on top of your agenda; that process will typically lead you to prioritize issues and problems and end up with a dominant one. As you do so, don't confuse what is urgent for what is important.

Often, students think that there is only ONE best way to define or frame the problem and they struggle to write their problem statement because they want it to be "perfect". In fact, a single

case can often be approached from various angles. While there may not be a single best way to define the problem, there are usually a narrow set of possibilities. The actual problem definition you will adopt reveals much about your perspective as a problem-solver. Whatever angle or perspective you adopt, make sure you are consistent and keep that perspective throughout the case and mobilize the arguments and facts that will support your problem statement.

Although the problem statement is usually written *after* the analysis has been completed, it usually comes at the beginning of a case report to provide focus to the reader. The entire problem statement should be no longer than a paragraph (a concise one!). First, summarize your problem statement in two sentences at the most. Second, in the remainder of the paragraph, outline succinctly: i) the overriding objective that the organization should be striving to achieve in resolving the problem; and (ii) the key factors (i.e. two or three) that must be considered to achieve a successful solution to the problem.

To get started, read the opening section of the case carefully: it will provide you with cues as to which type of case you're dealing with and will help you to align your preliminary efforts to solve the case. Then flip through the case and only look at section headings, exhibits and tables, and appendices if any. What catches your eye? What is your first impression of the problem or issue at hand? Go in for a deeper dive and read the case thoroughly: make notes, scribble, use whatever tool you feel comfortable with to orient yourself (mind mapping may work well[1]), note any reflection or ideas you may have. Don't edit or censor yourself at this point. Complete your analysis (see next step) and then firm up your decision or problem statement. Now you should know what type of case this is and you should be able to establish a clear and succinct problem statement. It's not rare to have to re-write and/or re-examine your problem statement, so don't be alarmed if that happens.

ANALYSIS

Cases include a considerable amount of information. Some of that information is important and key to solving the case, but other pieces of information may not be as critical and may only be there to provide context and depict the situation in its full richness or complexity. As you read the case carefully, focus on what is happening, what it may mean for the company and for the decision makers. Make sure to understand the objective facts and what they mean. Then, list the subjective perceptions or assertions contained in the case and ask yourself how much credence you place on those. Has your initial impression changed or been confirmed at this point?

Completing a case means getting to know an industry you may know little about. As you conduct your analysis, piece all the relevant information to develop your understanding of the dynamics that matter. If numbers or financials are included in the case, give meaning to them. Use simple calculations, ratios or other metrics to contextualize that information. At this point, a useful approach here is to formalize and synthesize your analysis into a short (3 to 4) bullet list: what portrait is that list tracing?
To fine tune your analysis, ask yourself what tool or concept learned through your studies and experience might you bring to bear to sift through all the information and organize your

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[1] For instance see https://www.educationalappstore.com/best-apps/top-5-mind-mapping-apps-for-students or https://www.goodfirms.co/blog/best-free-and-open-source-mind-mapping-software)

thoughts. This may include Market and Industry Analysis, Environmental Analysis, Competitive Analysis, Customer Analysis and/or customer journey mapping, or a SWOT Analysis. As with your problem statement, do not merely restate the facts of the case. This section should be analytical, and not description. Do not simply list factors and trends that may bear on the problem resolution; make sure to also clearly outline the impact of these factors. It is not the ability to identify discrete pieces of information and factors that make a good marketing manager as much as the foresight and creativity to see the ramifications of this information.

Comprehensiveness, depth, and thoroughness are important here. From an academic and pedagogical perspective, this is an important component of the overall case methodology as it helps to develop the requisite analytical skills for effective and efficient decision-making.

IDENTIFICATION & EVALUATION of ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

In this section of a case report, you outline and evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of the most plausible alternative strategies to solve the stated problem. As much as possible, each alternative should have a strong strategic orientation. The alternatives should be feasible, different, consistent with the analysis, and in line with the stated problem. Make sure to address any alternative specifically identified in the case as well as any others worthy of consideration.

Each alternative should then be evaluated on its own with clear criteria. Clearly indicate by what yardstick or metric you would know if your eventual recommendation solved the problem successfully? For each alternative you may want to list the pros (i.e. advantages/positives) and cons (i.e. disadvantages/negatives). This listing should be exhaustive and critically evaluated and should focus on the likely outcomes (short and long term) of each alternative. The pros should be treated together and then the cons. Mixing the pros and cons together (as well as mixing the alternatives together) detracts from the overall potential effectiveness of this step. Both short-term and long-term consequences of each alternative, when pertinent, should be addressed. Also, try to anticipate, in as much as possible, perverse negative consequences of each alternative to minimize future blind spots or surprises when you get to the implementation phase of your recommendations. Finally, evaluate each alternative on the criteria you established: which one(s) comes out ahead?

Your evaluation should also demonstrate a grounded comprehension of strategic and competitive dynamics in the market or industry in question. How are competitors likely to react to each alternative course of action? How will industry dynamic impinge on the forecasted effectiveness of each alternative? The evaluations should also include financial projections (placed in Appendix if necessary) when relevant. At this point you may have trouble in seeing "the forest from the trees." Therefore, the use of some sort of comparative decision grid is an excellent tool to organize your thoughts. The outcome of such a grid should be the identification of the best suited alternative given your stated problem and analysis of the situation. This will set up the next section.

RECOMMENDATION & RATIONALE

Choose the alternative that is best suited to the resolution of the stated problem. Obtain 'buy-in' from the reader by effectively justifying the recommended alternative. Make your decision criteria clearly known: why are you opting for *that* specific alternative? Clearly demonstrate how the recommended alternative best meets your decision criteria. To enhance the reader's confidence in the recommendation, the selected alternative and its support should be right at the beginning of the section. **Do not** "back into" your recommendation (e.g., do not begin the section by demonstrating how the rejected alternatives did not meet the criteria). Make sure that your final recommendation is in line with organizational resources and capabilities.

PLAN OF ACTION / IMPLEMENTATION

When needed and/or feasible, provide a step-by-step action plan of what must be done, by whom, and by when. Particular attention must be directed to the specific tactics associated with the strategy recommendations. In laying out the plan, assume that you have been assigned the task of preparing all aspects of a detailed plan of action. Using a visual timeline can be effective to communicate the sequencing of actions to be taken. As you outline your implementation plan, attempt to identify the critical success factors: what is/are the to-do items that are critical to get 100% right for your proposed solution to achieve its objectives?

One way to devise your plan of action is to put yourself in the shoes of the key decision maker and ask yourself: 1) "what is the first phone call (or action) I make tomorrow morning?" and then 2) "what do I do after that?". These two questions have a way of focusing your attention and getting you to be specific as to what needs to be done, by whom, and when. Make sure that your plan of action is realistic and in line with available resources and capabilities within the organization.

Finally, remember the proverbial saying in business: "What gets managed gets measured but not everything that must be managed can be measured". Think about and include a paragraph on control or evaluation mechanisms. How will you know (i.e., by which metrics) if your plan of action is successful? What metrics and other more "soft measures" should you obtain and monitor so to 1) validate the course of action you've taken, and 2) imbed in your next planning cycle so to improve your decision-making effectiveness? How can you link these metrics to key outcomes and decisions that leaders/decision makers are concerned with?

REFERENCES

Lebel, J. (2021). *Case Study Methodology*. [Unpublished manuscript]. Marketing Department, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University.