

“Cracking” the Case

For those who are preparing for an ensuing case discussion, here’s a process that I have found makes for a well-prepared and fully engaged group of participants.

Individually:

- Read the first page of the case, plus the last page, and identify what the decision is that the protagonist faces.
- Then read the article(s) assigned with the case, if any, and any discussion questions the instructor may have provided.
- Then skim the **entire** case very quickly, including the exhibits at the back of the case (important!), in order to see what sort of evidence you’ll be able to use to formulate your decision about what the protagonist should do.
- Now go back and read the case carefully, making notes or conducting analyses that support the argument you plan to make or that counter arguments you expect others to make. But read carefully. The entire case may turn on a key fact buried in the middle of the prose on page 6 or in a line on a financial exhibit at the back of the case.

In a small study group prior to the class session:

- Discuss the case, using the discussion questions (if any) as your guide.
- Be open to new points of view or snippets of evidence that you’ll undoubtedly hear. (“I hadn’t thought of it that way!”)
- Ask yourself and your peers about similar situations you and they have faced. What did you or they do? What did you or they learn? (Sometimes the hard way!)
- Rethink your argument. Has your study group discussion altered your view?
- Don’t worry that you don’t reach a consensus. You probably won’t reach a consensus in the classroom, either! Your instructor is not expecting you to reach a “right answer”!

The In-Class Discussion

Your instructor will probably choose one person in the room to open the discussion. He or she might call on you – a cold-call, as it’s known in the trade – so come well-prepared, in case you are called upon. He or she will then build up the participants’ set of arguments, including yours, about whether “north” or “south” is the best way to go. But don’t be surprised if one of your fellow participants or your instructor, perhaps with additional cold-calls or probing questions, leads the discussion down an unexpected path. There’s lots to learn from the story told in a good case besides the discussion about what the protagonist should do and the application of the ideas in an article or book chapter that may accompany the case.

At the end of the case session, your instructor may tell you “what happened.” Beware, however, of assuming that what the protagonist actually did is “the right answer,” even if things turned out well, or “the wrong answer” if things turned out badly. One never knows what the other path(s) would have brought forth.

John Mullins, Associate Professor of Management Practice, London Business School, prepared this note as a guide for case-method learners. It is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of classroom teaching and learning.

Your instructor may also offer some lessons he or she has learned from teaching the case or from his or her similar experiences or research. Some of those lessons will undoubtedly have been learned by your instructor in earlier discussions of the same case. Thus the insights you bring to a particular case discussion may have a shelf-life that's much longer than you might imagine!

Where Do Great Cases Come From?

Great cases come from colorful, inspiring characters in interesting companies facing difficult decisions, decisions of the sort that their peers are also likely to face at some point. In other words, people like you!

Consider whether there's a decision you've recently faced that would provide the basis for a great case, especially if the decision point occurred a few years back so there's the opportunity for participants who study your case to know what happened afterwards. If the setting in which your dilemma occurred is one that fits a topic your instructor wants to teach, he or she may well be eager to develop a case on your company.

If that happens, you'll find that being the subject of a well-researched case will open your eyes to things you never thought of when you were in the throes of making your decision. And you'll find that attending a case session in which a difficult decision you and your company faced is discussed by a group of intelligent and experienced peers – or even a group of relatively inexperienced undergraduate or graduate students – is both a humbling and richly satisfying experience.

Best of all, if you have a case written on you and your company, you'll be “giving back” to the education of tomorrow's business leaders. I hope you'll be as generous with them as the case protagonists you will study have been with you!

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