The AOM IM Division Teaching Committee How to Produce Different Types of Cases Series Presents:

WRITING AND USING SHORT CASES IN TEACHING

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Introduction

Until roughly ten years ago, lengthy business school cases were the norm; they challenged students to identify the key factors in complex situations and come up with analyses and solutions. Today, shorter cases, which are ideally 1-5 pages in length or a maximum of 10 pages, are gaining in popularity. They too enhance student and executive problem solving and critical thinking skills, but they are much more focused. The impetus for shorter cases originated from publishers who wanted to include them in textbooks. In recent years, however, the popularity of shorter stand-alone cases has also grown among professors and trainers. They discovered that they can accomplish the same teaching objectives with shorter cases and that students, and executives in particular, are more likely to read them thoroughly. Harvard Business School Publishing, for example, started a new series of cases of ten pages or less called "Brief Cases." The Case Center and Ivey Business School Publishing have also made available a growing number of shorter cases. These are often referred to as "critical incident cases." There is an entire journal -- the *Journal of Critical Incidents* (JCI) -- that publishes only short cases, which they describe as follows:

> "JCI's focus is on brief incidents that tell about real situations. Each incident tells a story about an event, an experience, a blunder, or a success. Unlike long cases, incidents provide only essential historical details and limited situation development. Instead, each incident provides a focal point that stimulates students to arrive at a course of action or analysis. Most incidents are decision oriented, but well written descriptive incidents are possible. Quantitatively oriented incidents need to

include questions that require judgment. Critical incidents can be based on either field work or secondary research. The maximum length is three single-spaced pages" (Society for Case Research, https://sfcr.org/jci/).

Many professors create critical incident cases that, depending on quality and topical interest, can be published in three possible outlets: case clearinghouses, textbooks, or publishers who provide cases as textbook support materials. To augment our personal experience with critical incidents cases, we interviewed several prolific case writers, one of whom has used all three dissemination methods and is also a paid advisor on potential critical incident topics for a major textbook publisher.

How to Write Effective Short Cases

Choosing the right topic:

- The best short cases are not simply descriptive; they also describe a challenging managerial dilemma or question for students to resolve. Such cases can trigger high levels of engagement and memorable discussions for students, in addition to simulating work experience.
- The best cases have two or more courses of action/answers in response to a dilemma that initially seem feasible to different students (or, ideally, even to the same student). This spurs careful analysis, reflection and debate.
- Cases are richer and more engaging when they include numerous, well-chosen quotations and reliable data. If primary sources and interviewees are the source of information, a company representative, or even a company lawyer, usually has to approve and sign off on the case. The likelihood of gaining this approval should be discussed before gathering information to avoid wasting time on a case that can never be shared. Secondary sources should be carefully documented.
- Another organizational barrier to cases occurs when your interest in a particular case topic is greater than that of your key contact at a firm. Contacts have to be excited about the topic and its importance in their work life. If you find a bad fit, find another topic or another firm.
- Topics also have to grab the attention of your audiences. Many effective topics are culled from current news headlines and sometimes targeted toward different groups -- undergraduates, MBA's, or executives. For example, younger students with limited work experience relate to dilemmas they can readily imagine facing: "Are tattoos an acceptable reason, under any conditions, to reject applicants for business positions?" or "How can front-line restaurant employees enforce COVID-19 restrictions?" For executive programs, cases tend to be more complex and address topical challenges managers face, such as: "Are COVID-19 vaccine-producing companies responsible for

ensuring that all countries have equal access to vaccines?" Master case authors are able to predict whether their audiences will care enough about a topic to become intellectually and emotionally engaged when discussing it.

- Good topics possess the appropriate degree of complexity to stimulate good discussion and challenge mental maps.
- Most cases describe a real situation at a real company and use the firm's name. Some cases describe personal work experiences of the authors or someone they have interviewed in disguised organizations. Some disguised cases bring together what has been seen in several different organizations to make a case in a fictitious organization. Most find that cases which describe a real situation in a real organization where the name of the organization can be used work best, and this is by far the most common type of case including most cases distributed via case clearing houses. Case journals normally only publish such cases. Textbooks are sometimes more flexible.
- Highly effective, integrative cases are rich enough that they can be used to teach several concepts. For example, The Donor Service Department Case (see Osland, References) has been used to teach handling difficult employees, motivation, leadership styles, organizational change, cultural differences, cross-cultural coaching, and so forth. Multi-topic cases are very useful for final exams that assess the breadth and depth of student knowledge and critical thinking. They may also contain a greater variety of information, which simulates the real world and forces students to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant data.

Concise storytelling:

- The space constraints of critical incidents necessitate the ability to cherry-pick or select the bare minimum of information needed for adequate understanding and complexity. Authors constantly question whether they are including too little or too much detail.
- Most critical incidents begin and end with the same hook. The main dilemma faced by the main protagonist is usually described in the opening paragraph and revisited in the final paragraph.
- A good storyline has to be complemented by a clear, concise, and spare writing style to meet the page limit.

Diverse Opinions and Information:

- Cases are more realistic if they include the key representative viewpoints on the issues. Whose voices need to be heard to fully understand the issue?
- Engaging cases include several sources of information: a description of events, documents, newspapers, quotations, etc.

Getting your case released:

- Unless your case is written entirely from secondary sources, it has to be reviewed by your key contact at the company in question who also signs a form giving their permission to use the case for teaching. Case journals and major case clearing houses like Ivey, Harvard, and the Case Center provide forms that must be signed before listing your cases.

Maximizing the use of your case:

- Cases published with one of the major case clearing houses mentioned above are more widely advertised and sold. The Case Center is more open to cases written by faculty from diverse universities, Harvard and Ivey have also become more open to external authors in recent years. In some instances, it is possible to obtain advance permission to publish a short case both at a case clearing house and in a textbook with proper acknowledgement. As noted previously, you can also publish in a case teaching journal like the *Journal of Critical Incidents.* Be sure to explicitly discuss early on whether publishing in multiple places is possible with all involved parties.

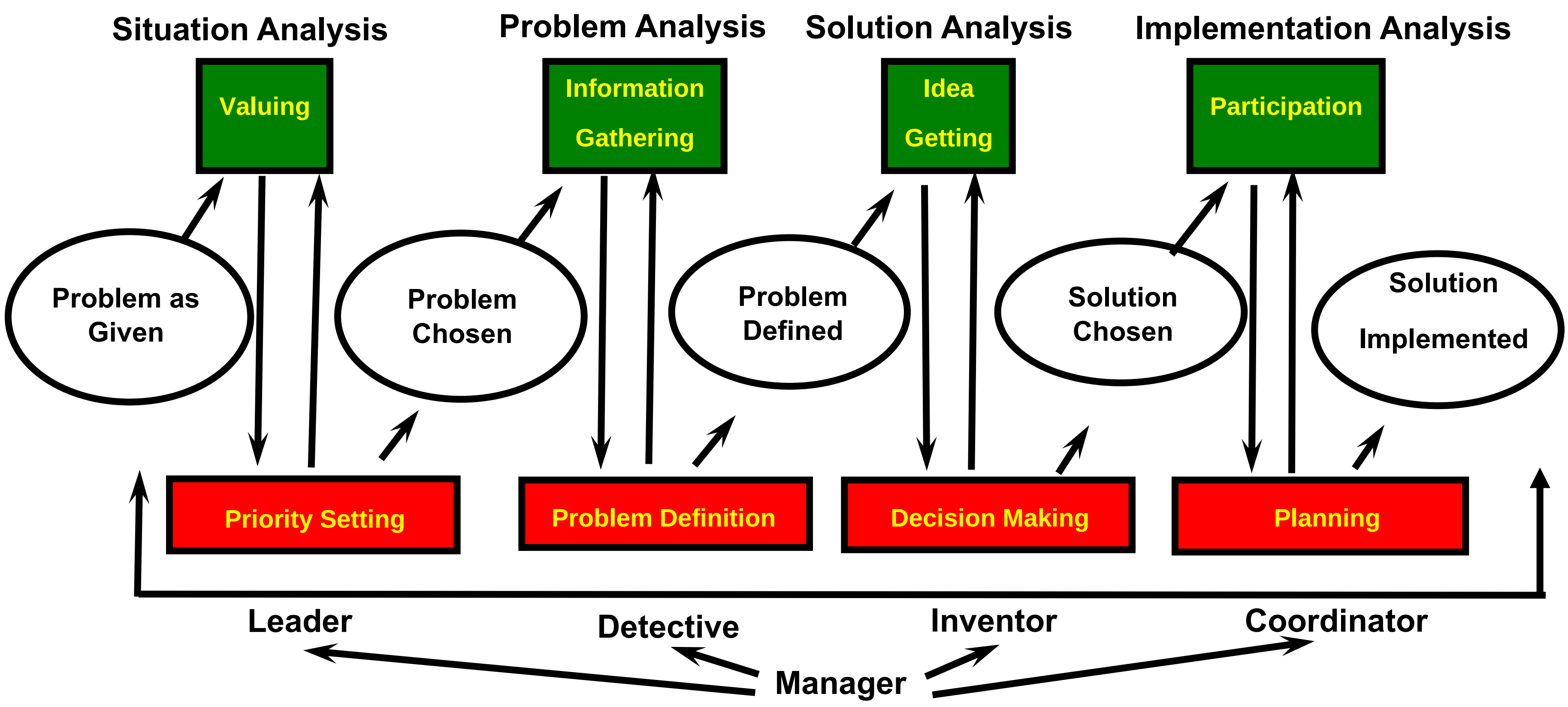
The Importance of Excellent Teaching Notes:

- Cases without a good teaching note are far less likely to be used. Unlike the short cases, teaching notes <u>can</u> be expansive. They can include potential preparation questions and/or debriefing questions and answers, theoretical foundations, explanations of key concepts and their relevance, follow-up information (e.g., Case B and C); detailed teaching instructions, sample diagrams of board use during class, and potential readings to assign with the case.
- It is useful to have a section of the teaching note on potential problems that might occur when teaching the case and how to avoid or minimize their impact.
- Students like to know what actually happened to both protagonists and organizations in the case. Follow-up cases or reports are very helpful.
- Videos by the actual main character(s) in the case reflecting on what happened in the case can be extremely powerful. If you invite the main protagonist to be a guest speaker during the case discussion in your class, you can use this opportunity to video his or her comments on student proposals and questions.
- It is often best to write a teaching note only after teaching the case a few times.
- If your objective is to increase problem-solving skills, David Kolb's problem-solving model as a dialectic process (Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007, p. 288-294) can serve as an overarching template. It consists of four categories:

1) Situation Analysis (what is the most important problem?); 2) Problem Analysis (what are the causes?); 3) Solution Analysis (what are the best solutions?); and 4) Implementation Analysis (how should be solution be implemented?). As the model shown below in Figure 1 indicates, the problem-solving process is not simply linear. Instead, it contains wave-like expansions outward (divergence) to gather alternatives, information and ideas followed by inward contractions (convergence) to focus, evaluate and decide.

Kolb's Problem Solving Model

Source: Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner (2007). *Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, p. 289.



Teaching Cases

- Some critical incidents may require less time to teach since they contain less information that functions as "red herrings" (something that distracts attention from the real issue). See the next section for alternative ways to take advantage of any additional teaching time that results from using short cases.
- One advantage of critical incidents is that students can read them in class, if necessary. Reading them as homework, however, uses class time more efficiently and allows more time for analysis and reflection, which are important steps that facilitate case learning.
- When cases are assigned as homework, lack of serious preparation can result in lackluster classroom discussion. To avoid this problem, instructors can require pre-work on the case that serves as the "ticket of admission" to the classroom. Thus, unprepared students are not permitted to attend class. Pre-work might be answers to assigned case questions or a completed analytical template like Kolb's model. Students may be requested to make two copies – one to hand in and one copy for reference purposes during the discussion. This method ensures that everyone is prepared to make the best use of shared class time.
- One of the most important aspects of case facilitation is the opening question, which is designed to trigger engagement and debate rather than silence. Here are some successful examples (Schiano & Ellet, 2019):
  1) What key issues are the protagonist facing, and what would you recommend that s/he do to address them?
  2) "You are *[the protagonist]* on *[the date of the case]*. What will you do today?"
  3) "What is it like to work in *[relevant business unit]* at *[company in the case]*?"
  4) "How did *[the protagonist]* end up in this situation?"
  5) "You are a consultant hired by *[company in the case]*. What would you recommend your client does? How did you decide what your client should do?"
- It is important to ensure that different cases have main characters who are diverse in terms of gender, nationality, background, etc. so that students can find some character in a case they can relate to personally.
- Make an effort to call equally on people in different parts of the room.
- By moving around the classroom while teaching, professors can engage and involve students in all parts of the classroom.
- Encourage students to debate directly with one other rather than talking only to the professor. The professor is there to guide and moderate the discussion while students attempt to persuade others with different viewpoints. Professors can encourage this by moving to stand off to the side behind students who are engaging one another – literally, "giving the floor" to students.
- Body language and silence are important tools teachers can use to emphasize important points.

Facilitating the case discussion

Effective facilitation is the heart of the case method, and much has been written on this topic. Here's a checklist of twenty-one useful techniques created by Sudzina (2005).

1. Setting the agenda – outlining the plan and expectations for the case discussion
2. Interviewing – asking a student what he/she personally thinks about a certain issue and why
3. Follow-up – asking for more clarification; i.e., the consequences of a proposed action
4. Role-play – assigning, or having students volunteer, to assume the values, perspectives, motivations, and emotions of one of the characters in the case; to become that character
5. Probing – asking for more information or explanation
6. Elaboration – having students provide a fuller explanation of the facts or issues
7. Asking for information – uncovering overlooked facts, details, or research; i.e., "What's missing from this discussion of the issues?"
8. Devil's Advocate inquiry – challenging students to disagree with and/or question a course of action that seems plausible, but may not be appropriate in this case situation
9. Open-ended questioning – asking students' opinions in order to jump-start the discussion
10. Active listening – rephrasing a student response, i.e., "If I heard you correctly, you said…"
11. Alternative perspective – asking for the opposite or different perspective than the one just given
12. Drawing out students – calling on students who tend not to participate and asking them to comment. This is particularly effective for moving the discussion around the room.
13. Drawing out very shy students—using warm calling which is when you tell a student I am going to come to you in a few minutes to ask you X or to ask you about something. This gives them time to prepare and feel a bit less nervous.
14. Clarification – asking for additional information to make clear a student's point of view
15. Reinforcing appropriate use of resources – giving positive feedback for the use of research or professional sources
16. Polling – through a show of hands, asking who agrees or disagrees with the last comment
17. Redirecting – calling on a student in another part of the room to comment on the last statement; focusing attention in another part of the room
18. Compare and contrast – focusing attention on how this situation/solution is alike and different from others students have encountered

19. Positive feedback – reinforcing student responses through specific, supportive feedback
20. Summarizing – asking students to capture, in their own words, what major points were gleaned from the case discussion
21. Closure – bringing the conversation full-circle by reiterating the goals of the discussion (i.e., setting the agenda) and reinforcing the lessons learned, particularly with the applications of theory and research to practice

Alternative Case Teaching Approaches

It is important to vary the way one teaches different cases to enhance student interest. Furthermore, learning can be enriched by using different teaching methods, like those found below, which help students see or remember the learnings more vividly.

- To encourage more participation, instructors can assign teams a particular case discussion question and allow them an appropriate amount of time (e.g., 15-20 minutes) to prepare a team response which is shared in a general debriefing session. Or they can assign teams to analyze different protagonists or firms featured in the case.
- Critical incidents with clearly described protagonists often lend themselves to role plays once the case has been analyzed sufficiently. Role plays help students test the practical application of their behavioral recommendations and hone interaction skills. Instructors can create student teams that analyze assigned protagonists and brainstorm how they should behave in order to be effective. The team would then elect one student to role play their assigned character. In a more high-stakes role play situation, volunteers are requested to role play an interaction that reflects case recommendations in front of the entire class. ("How would you provide feedback to her? Turn this situation around?). In choosing students to do a role play it is important that a professor thinks about who is eager to do the role play and a confident speaker so that the illustration likely works well. At its conclusion, the instructor asks the role players what they did that was effective and then asks that question of the class. Next, the role players are asked if they did anything that was ineffective, and then addresses the same question to the class. "Would you do anything differently if you had the chance to repeat the role play?" And finally, first the role players and then the class is asked, "What did you learn from the experience?" After the role players and the class observers have provided feedback in the process, the professor can add anything that has not been covered. A supportive learning community that knows how to give and receive effective feedback should already be in place to lessen the fear of making errors or being criticized publicly. Instructors can specify in advance that we don't expect perfection in role plays; like a live case, they simply provide us with a helpful opportunity to reflect and perform better in real life.
- An easier role-playing situation involves having teams prepare for a protagonist role and then dividing the entire class into representative protagonists and observers so that everyone has a role in a small group. This creates less pressure and has the

benefit of allowing all students to participate, but the instructor cannot observe every group. S/he can, however, provide evaluation rubrics and debriefing templates to each small group and allow them to self-debrief. This can be followed with a plenary in which key lessons are shared. In case discussions students often say things like "I would suggest manager X meet with employee Y and have a talk." Often students have not fully considered how such a conversation would unfold or its implications. Role plays provide an opportunity for students to test recommended actions and see their impact. In some instances, it is useful for the instructor to take on one of the roles to more fully convey the points they want to get across.

- Instructors can also assign the facilitation duties for moderating case discussions to rotating teams of students (Murphy, 2020). To ensure their success, instructors can introduce students to facilitation techniques in the beginning of the course and sit nearby in case their intervention is requested or needed. Instructors can provide a brief summation at the end if anything important was not covered. (See https://instructionalmoves.gse.harvard.edu/facilitating-student-led-discussions)
- Instructors can organize case competitions in which the proposed solutions of student teams are judged by the entire class and/or visitors. Alternatively, one can assign just one group of students to propose a solution to the case which can be used in conjunction with a broader standard case discussion involving the entire class.

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