

Managing Technological Innovation

MGT 693

Spring Term, Y2K+1
1800 hrs, Thursday
Asheville Campus

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Case Analysis Guidelines

The Case Method--Motivation

As most of you no doubt are aware, the Harvard Business School decided a numbers of years ago to change over to the case method as its primary means of instruction. Since then other top graduate business schools have followed Harvard's lead--MIT, Stanford, University of Michigan, UVA, Upenn, to name just a few. This method's appeal is first and foremost pedagogical. Real world (RW) issues do not present themselves as logically sequenced sets of study questions decision-makers must then address. Rather, the real world is so rich with information and multi-faceted as to often appear quite overwhelmingly ambiguous and amorphous. The challenge most any decision-maker must then face is to first clarify what is in fact the issue that he or she must address. Only after an issue has been adequately clarified, does the decision-maker then enjoy some reasonable possibility of being able to effectively solve it. For this reason, the case method is not merely some tactical pedagogical tool. Rather, this method lies at the heart of teaching strategy itself. In comparing a series of cases and contrasting them with each other, students *inductively* learn to construct conceptual frameworks out of relevant information and selected theories applicable to given contexts and times. The construction of such frameworks must necessarily, therefore, be a creative exercise that is also very much skill dependent. Case analyses provide one of the more effective and efficient ways to acquire this skill in general as well as in particular where the study of managing technological innovation is concerned.

Choreographing a Case Class

It will be the instructor's responsibility to lead students through the key conceptual and decision issues in a case without necessarily pre-judging the correctness of any one student's contribution. If the case is indeed to be an instrument to stimulate inductive conceptual rameworking , then a healthy vigorous debate on the merits of an argument is an absolute cornerstone of good case discussion. This does not mean that the instructor should not have a point of view. It means that the instructor should not pre-suppose that his/her point of view is the most accurate. Nor should incorrect analyses be pardoned. Rather, patient discussion should expose faulty premises. The instructor has the responsibility of leading the class through the critical issues, insuring that different but relevant points of view are aired and that faulty ones are identified and understood for their weaknesses and flaws. Learning to inductively construct conceptual frameworks appropriate to the analysis of the case at hand means that students need to be responsible for "taking a stab" at putting such a framework together. While the instructor should be responsible for leading the class to a conclusion, that conclusion should be a broad thoughtful characterization of the various relevant viewpoints presented and how they contribute to an understanding of the topic under consideration. Keep in mind that conducting a class this way is "risky business." A poor class meeting could be disastrous. There are *safer* ways to conduct a case class in which the instructor would have more of his/her control "hardwired" into it. At worst, this would result in an "average" class and at best, the result could be "impressive." Such "safer" ways of conducting a case class would, however, not freely allow students to inductively develop their thinking capability and learn how to build adaptable conceptual frameworks for analyzing real-world issues about which they will be obliged to make decisions.

Preparing a Case Analysis

At the beginning of each class session at which a case will be analyzed (this will be practically every class), each student is to submit a copy of his/her analysis to the instructor. Presumably, he/she will keep a copy for

him/herself. A student should also keep backups of all his/her submissions, preferably computerized backups. The hard copy submission should be three to four pages in length, double-spaced, in a Times Roman font of size twelve. (Some variation on this font requirement is allowed as long as it is not extreme.)

The organization of the analysis submitted is to contain several sections that will also for the most part, constitute the basis upon which class discussion of the case is conducted. The following 1) identifies these sections and of what each consists and 2) constitutes the rubric by which case analyses students submit will be evaluated. A rationale for each section and its content is also presented. What in fact is being submitted is an abbreviated case teaching note.

Synopsis

This section should consist of a brief general statement (more often than not, a paragraph of not more than eight to nine sentences or twenty lines in length) that provides the reader an overview of the case. Upon reading the synopsis, the reader should have roughly the same idea as to what the case is about as if he/she had read the entire case. Keep this in mind. The synopsis is NOT an abridged version of the case. NOR should you succumb to the temptation of including in the synopsis any *implications* or *conclusions* you might *draw* from the case. Think of the synopsis in this way. Use the case project that another student has written that you will analyze at the end of the term as your model. You will need to provide your classmates a synopsis of the case you will analyze. Since they will not have access to that case, your synopsis must be sufficiently well written so that they as the result of reading it should be able to read it and follow your analysis. The same can be said for you with the synopses you will receive from your class colleagues who will also present analyses.

Decision Orientation

Most cases will contain a dilemma the result of which is a decision the case protagonist (a person or firm) made, could have made, or will have to make. A good question to ask one's self is what would YOU do or would have done if you were the case protagonist? Such a question forces the analysis and the reconciliation of disparate evidence. This unavoidably charts a direction for the decision-maker effecting an "action" plan. It is human nature to hold off making decisions as long as possible until an understanding of the issues being confronted becomes more refined. Seeking after such refinement however, often becomes an ruse (intentional or otherwise) to delay taking action. Real world decision-makers rarely enjoy such luxury. Most often they have neither the time nor data to resolve all puzzles. Judgement despite uncertainty is essentially the art of management. Forcing a decision, forces students to reconcile imperfect and incomplete information leading to a stronger analysis because students must then learn to make tradeoffs, prioritize, and make judgement calls with respect to what they consider to be the more important drivers of the case. Furthermore, formulating an action planning question will undoubtedly bring different perspectives and ways of looking at evidence. This permits the class to get into framework details and debate various contingencies that drive that framework. Therefore, where appropriate, a good case analysis will expolit the various courses of action that could have been pursued, were pursued, and/or should have been pursued.

Themes/Analyses

This section is at the heart of the analysis. Most cases will consist of a number of interesting themes that drive them. Since, however, the cases that are assigned are paired with particular topics scheduled in the syllabus, only those themes that relate to the topic under consideration need to be identified. Therefore, restricting the number of themes this section identifies to three or four is more than sufficient. NOTE rigorous analysis absolutely requires that such themes be linked to what readings assigned from the text and supplemental readings expolit. Put differently, one's study of the assigned readings provides the bases for recognizing the relevant case themes present *and these connections are to be made explicit and documented*. Once the presence of these themes is adequately documented, the particulars unique to the case can be considered in their thematic contexts and the analysis can then proceed with some rigor critically determining what good management practice has to say about the management practices exhibited in the case. This is the means by which the case analysis supports the appropriateness or inappropriateness of courses of actions (decisions) as identified in the previous section.

Keep in mind that there will not always be a clear consensus on what a case is saying. In fact, a skillfully written case should have some ambiguity to it. This ambiguity permits a range of arguments about a topic to be evaluated and furthermore, the RW itself has a good deal of ambiguity to it where many courses of action must be pursued with "fear and trembling." Thus, the notion that there may not be any one and only one correct set of

answers to a case should not be disconcerting. The conceptual framework the case analyst creates is a *framework of order* he/she imposes on reality. Reality is often too multi-faceted to be exhaustively captured by such abstractions. If this were not the case, such frameworks would not be abstractions at all but attempted duplications of reality evaluated on the basis of how precise they are. Consequently, good analyses being based on reasonable inferences made from the data can lead to different final outcomes. This does not mean that "anything goes," however. Sloppily prepared and unsupported analyses invariably lead to outcomes that are problematic and not compelling.

NOTE: One should AVOID merging the *Decision Orientation* and *Themes/Analyses* sections of the case analysis. However, it may be entirely appropriate to reverse the order in which these two sections are presented.

Summary

A case analysis should conclude with a summary. Think of this as something like an "executive summary." It should be a reflection of the themes developed in the previous section, expositing the linkages between those themes, and how they lead to judgements about possible courses actions from a reasonable analysis of the data.