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A CASE FOR THE CASE METHOD

by

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Case studies are a very valuable management training technique. There is a void of good cases in food distribution and the Food Distribution Research Society should undertake a project to fill this void.

The value of the business case for class discussion for written reports and even for examinations is generally recognized by business faculties at most universities today. This paper assumes that extension and those universities concerned with food distribution education have used business cases and can attest to their value. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that the use of business cases in food distribution education is widespread or frequent. The literature is absent of facts that would suggest that food distribution firms have significantly used the case method as a training tool.

There are perhaps many reasons for the less than widespread and frequent use of business cases by the food distribution industry. It is this author's opinion that the principal reason is the absence of a wide assortment of cases in food distribution management. If the forementioned reason is a fact, then it would seem appropriate that the food distribution research society undertake a project to correct the void of cases. This paper will later make a specific recommendation for at least partially correcting the situation. First, the paper will briefly examine the history

of the case method, its probable effectiveness, the art of writing a case, and one procedure for analysis of cases.

The case method of instruction in business began in 1908 at the Harvard Business School.¹ It was in 1919 under the direction of Dean Wallace B. Donham that the case method began to grow and flourish. It is an established fact the Harvard Business School has done more to advance the use of the case method of instruction than any other institution in this country.

The philosophy behind the Harvard case approach might be stated in the following way.² "The case method asks not how a man may be trained to know, but how a man may be trained to act" or "business education is not to teach truths -- but to teach men to think in the presence of new situations". The Harvard method assumes that if the learning process is to be effective, something dynamic must take place in the learner, that the mere act of listening to wise statements and sound advice does little for anyone.³

A business case has been defined as "a carefully written description of an actual situation in business which provokes in the reader the need to decide what can and should be done".⁴ There is a useful place for both long and short, complicated and simple cases. Teaching by the "case method" may range from the nondirective kind of discussion characteristic of classes at the Harvard

Business School to closely supervised discussion centering around specific questions which the class is asked to consider.

When students are first introduced to cases, a list of questions at the end of the material can provide a helpful transition from the lecturer environment of the classroom. At this early stage a case should acquaint the student with a typical business situation and guides them to the areas in special need of attention. Many educators believe that as additional cases are used, the purpose of the case method should shift from developing "the" solution to recognizing the problems. Peter Drucker says, "The most common source of mistakes in management decisions is emphasis on finding the right answers rather than the right question." Thus, many educators argue for the absence of questions from the case text. The Harvard cases do not have questions at the end of the case. Dr. Harold Fox of DePaul University states, "When learners face a case without questions, it challenges them to project themselves into realistic conditions of uncertainty and pressures so that they can formulate a sound course of action without prompting."

It cannot be overstressed that the decision-making process, not the decision, is the substance of the case method. In doing analysis for solving the "case", one is not searching for the correct solution.

The maximum goal of the case method is the development of mind which has superior ability to transfer its power from familiar types of problems to new ones. Persons with such minds also need the power to explain to others what is going on, that is to verbalize their thinking.⁵ These ways of thinking include the ability to (a) recognize the problem, (b) discover and arrange the facts, (c) set up alternatives, (d) make a decision based on the alternatives, and (e) take action.

An effective case is one which induces the student to grapple with a specific, identifiable problem. The premise is that the learning process is thus made more effective through internal growth. To tell the individual the "answer" to a case before he can analyze the problem seems to have an arresting effect upon the learning process. The instructor has teaching responsibilities which only he can assume, but it is not his responsibility to tell the student what and when to think.

With respect to adult education, the case method has definite possibilities because of the following situations:⁷

1. Industry participants examine case situations from their own experiences and are, therefore, provided an opportunity to reflect on and modify, the lessons that experience has taught them.

2. Through this reflective process, new assumptions and ideas about their own job, their behavior and the behavior of others are evolved and carried over into actual work problems.

This paper will now examine some of the significant issues which those responsible for education in the food distribution industry should keep in mind in preparing and using cases.

1. More cases are needed at all levels of management in the food distribution industry.

2. Those using the case method need to develop skill in preparing and using cases. There is much accumulated experience that the teacher just beginning to use case materials will find helpful. For example: The case method at the Harvard Business School by McNair and published by McGraw-Hill should prove valuable.

3. There is room for wide variation of cases. Cases need not be based only

on real life situations nor be comprehensive. "Mini" cases or short problem situations may be fabricated from a composite of situations provided care is used in writing so as not to have inconsistencies.

4. Heavy reliance on the case method involves a serious danger. Systematic knowledge may be neglected and the student may be left to use relatively crude and weak analytical tools when he might have been trained to use more refined and powerful ones.⁶

5. The case method involves two significant costs. It takes a great deal of class time or training time to cover a given body of material or range of problems. And it is an expensive method of teaching if the instructor (school or firm) prepares a large part of the case material it uses.

Case Writing

Professor Culliton, at the time he was Assistant Director of Research at the Harvard Business School, has provided a number of tips in the technique of case writing.⁸ They should be considered as only partial suggestions as the technique will vary somewhat from case to case.

1. Organize the material -- write everything down if based on a field interview. Prepare an outline.

2. Theme -- set the theme of the case in the first paragraph.

3. Use the past tense -- cases written in the past tense retain their usefulness for teaching longer than cases in the present tense.

4. Tabulations -- tabulate all data that can be presented in table form.

5. Exhibits and appendixes -- tables, charts, balance sheets, forms and maps should be numbered and sourced.

6. Check figures and disguises -- check accuracy of figures and completeness of disguises.

7. Facts -- include all relevant facts available and acknowledge when significant facts were not available. Scrutinize the case so that there will be no difficulty in understanding the situation.

8. Published sources -- footnote published sources of data when the case is written under the real name.

9. Quotations -- permission to use quote or permission to reprint must be secured.

10. Use care in editing -- some ingenuity is required in seeding essential facts and figures through the body of the case, to be ferreted out by the students. Care must be exercised or the student will miss the point of the case.

11. Do not imply actions -- the case must be presented without implying that the actions of the company are either right or wrong.

12. Notes to the instructor -- additional information not essential to solving the case but helpful to discussion such as historical notes, how the case was secured and written should be made available to the instructor of the case.

Both the problem-finding and the stated-problem types of cases have their place in food distribution education. With respect to the latter category there are two types: those in which the problem is merely posed and those in which the company's decision and the reasons behind it are given. If the case is to be used with participants inexperienced in cases, the best strategy may be to take a complete solution and pick it apart. As experience with cases grows, the students develop the ability

to arrive at reasonable solutions independently, and the presentation of a company decision may curb their imagination.

Suggestions for case analysis --

There are many recommended procedures for case analysis. The following six steps have been used by the author with some success. The original source of the generalized method that follows is unknown.

Procedure for Analysis

The study of cases should follow essentially the same steps an executive would use in resolving an actual problem. There is some difference in emphasis, thus, a brief summary of the technique of case study may be helpful to the student.

1. Read the case completely to obtain an overall understanding of the situation.

2. Read the case more thoroughly including a careful study of the exhibits and tables to identify the key facts in the case. These key facts should be listed in summary form as to the meaning of the facts rather than only what they are. For example, "retail margins are 18%" is a fact. It conveys no meaning as to its significance. If we add that "this represents a decrease in margin from 25% and as a result retailers are not providing much push", the fact of an 18% margin now has significance for our identification of the case problem and its solution.

3. State the central problem in the case. Frequently, there may be additional sub-problems which need to be stated so that the scope and nature of the central problem is clearly identified.

The definition of the problem is the most important step in the decision-making process. Frequently, the statement has been made that a problem well defined is over half solved. In defining a problem one must distinguish between symptoms of the problem and the problem. A common example used is the symptom of declining sales which often is called the "problem".

4. Identify and state the alternative courses of action which are reasonable and feasible for this firm to consider as a possible solution for its problem.

Usually there are several courses of action a firm may adopt. It should be noted that one course of action may be to do nothing, that is, to make no changes from the present methods of operation.

5. Analyze each of the alternative courses of action and point out the advantages and disadvantages of each.

6. Develop a recommended solution and present a well-organized defense of the recommendation.

The man who can do each of these steps well has developed the ability to make sound executive decisions.

Earlier in this paper the author suggested that there was little evidence to suggest that the use of business cases in food distribution education is widespread or frequent. In a long range planning seminar at Ohio State nearly a decade ago, case studies were used heavily, including those that the participants developed themselves from their personal experiences.⁹ The primary role of the extension worker was to stimulate and direct discussion. In this way, it was possible to pool and expand the thinking and experiences of the participants.

This paper has attempted to establish the value of the case method in education. To help fill the void of good cases in food distribution, it is recommended that the Food Distribution Research Society undertake a project to assemble, publish and distribute a variety of cases to all those responsible for education in the food distribution industry. One method of accomplishing such a project would be a workshop where individuals would present cases they have written for review and editing. Kent State University would be happy to host such a workshop anytime in the near future. The cases could then be published by the Society and distributed at a reasonable cost.

In conclusion, Peter F. Drucker reminds us that success in real life depends on how well a person is able to find and exploit the opportunities that are available to him, and at the same time discover and deal with potential serious problems before they become critical. The case method should prove a valuable aid to improving effectiveness of management in the food distribution industry. The Food Distribution Research Society has a responsibility and an opportunity to help the industry.

Footnotes

1. McNair, M.P., The Case Method at the Harvard Business School, McGraw-Hill, 1954, p. 25.
2. McNair, M.P., p. 2.
3. McNair, M.P., p. 6.
4. Andrews, K.R., Executive Training by the Case Method, Harvard Business Review, XXIX (September, 1951).
5. Hunt, Pearson, "The Case Method of Instruction", Harvard Educational Review, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Summer 1951. Included in the pamphlet, "The Case Method of Instruction", published by the Harvard Business School.
6. Gordon, R. A. and Howell, J. E., "Higher Education for Business" Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 371.
7. McNair, M.P., p. 240.
8. McNair, M.P., p. 267.
9. Marion, B.W. and Skinner, R.W., "Extension Education with Marketing Firms", Journal of Farm Economics, December 1965, Vol. 47, No. 5.