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The Case Writing Method

International Facilitator's Companion

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imaginal training

Case Writing Method

This booklet is one of two which deal with case studies. In this booklet a method for writing a case is presented. The booklet called The Case Study Method presents a method for preparing to teach using the Case Study Method.



The Theory

Section One: The Theory

The Case Study Method is a teaching tool designed to develop management skills in students. It develops management skills by requiring that students study the details of a case, learn to ask relevant questions, analyze problems, formulate solutions and argue positions. A case study presents a sample of professional or business life in slow motion so that it can be studied in detail.

It teaches analytical thinking by having the students locate gaps in information, separate the relevant from the irrelevant information needed, and take into account important perspectives to come to a decision.

It helps students learn secondary management skills by developing the habit of taking a large number of factors into account, by encouraging them to see that there are several ways of looking at, thinking about and acting in a particular business situation, by strengthening communications skills through arguing for a particular approach or decision in working teams and before the whole group and by working in groups toward agreement.

The Case Study Method has drawbacks. Group discussion does not actually simulate what happens within the organization. Students have no responsibility in case simulations for implementing their decisions. They make heavy demands on the teacher's time (for preparation). They expose the weaknesses of poor teachers more than formal lectures do. They are not effective ways of teaching and learning substantive knowledge.

A case study is a unique way of teaching specific skills. A case study is not merely an exercise: an exercise rehearses behavioral pattern like newly learned skills. It is not a role play: a role play has participants practice behavioral pattern. It is not an example: an example is a way of illustrating a point or theory. It is not a simulation: a simulation is a way

of practicing skills. It is not a simulation, role play or a business game which may deal with realistic events played out largely for the purpose of providing a controlled experience. It is not a scenario, nor a problem, nor a way to get the correct answer.

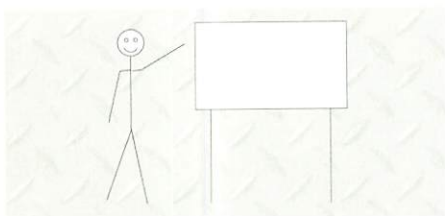
A case study poses a dilemma. Dilemmas are situations which require choices between two or more equal and usually unpleasant alternatives. A case has no correct answer though there may be one better answer. The best cases are based on reality. They include opinions and prejudices as well as facts. They are complex. They are created for students to analyze in a group discussion. It is 1 to 50 plus pages in length.

There are four different types of case study methods:

- 1 The Harvard Method.** The Classical or "Harvard" case uses very detailed reports, running to 40 or 50 pages with supporting charts and documents. Anything that might bear on the situation is included: history of company; biographies of key persons; information about finances, marketing, production, and other functions. Much of the information is not directly related to the problem.
- 2 The Short Case Method.** These cases are only a page or two. Most extraneous information is removed, leaving only the information pertinent to one problem.
- 3 The Video/Recording Method.** The use of recordings or films to present the case. This adds drama but usually lacks the background information found in the Classical case.
- 4 The Incident Process.** The case comes to the group as a reported incident. The group then needs to ask questions until they decide that they have the information they need. Individuals write a solution to the case followed by a general discussion. Students with similar

Section Two: The Process

The preparation of a good case requires a ready knowledge of the situation that the case is based on, clear teaching objectives and the use of writing skills.



Teaching Objectives. The first steps in creating a case is to determine what it is to be used for. The teaching objectives for the course and the specific session that the case will be used in need to be stated. The teaching objective of a case is usually the application of theoretical models or practical skills. Who the case is for (the students), what skills and experience they possess must all be understood.



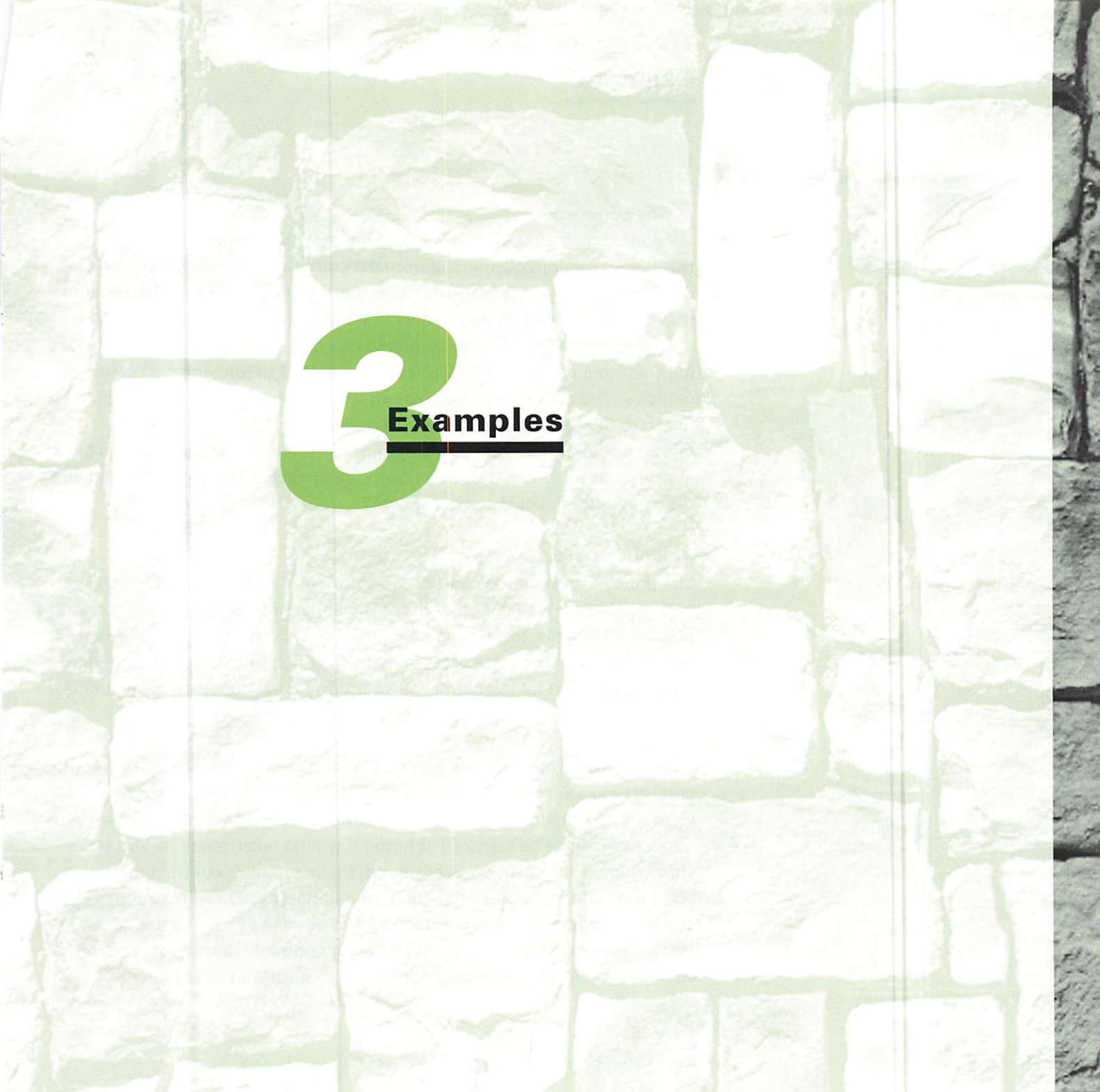
The Situation. Next the situation of the case is clarified. Situations from personal experience are listed and one is selected. Then all of the elements of the situation are brainstormed: events before and after the situation; emotions experienced; technical, organizational, and historical information; financial, political, educational, cultural aspects; groups and individuals involved. The dilemma of the case is written. Then a one sentence statement of the essences of the situation is written.



First Draft. A draft of the case is written in narrative form usually starting with a broad overview of the situation followed by historical information and then the details of the situation. Ask a question at the end. Write in past tense.



Finalize Case. The case is edited and rewritten. The format of the case is decided on. Key questions to the student discussion are written. The discussion is prepared, with questions, and comments. The data sheets, if any, are written. Many of these steps will overlap.



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Examples

Section Three: Example

Vacuum

1 The company

Vacuum, which specializes in selling domestic appliances (washing machines, vacuum cleaners, automatic coffee-makers, etc.) has its own service division and is well-known in the area for its better than excellent service. *Vacuum* firmly subscribes to the old saying "the customer is always right." Although the company has only been going for three years it got off to a good start, and already has a staff of ten, and two service vehicles. The company could expand further if trained personnel could be found to fill the positions. After a dynamic start, however, several entrepreneurial problems are cropping up. While the annual returns have always been positive, they have been lower each year, and this is causing the managing director some concern.

2 Products and services

The policy formulated as part of the company's business plan aims at making *Vacuum's* selection of domestic appliances as broad and deep as possible. Thus the customer looking for household products has a large variety of types and price categories from which to choose. Saying no to a customer must be avoided at all costs. The aim is to stock at least one extra sample of every product.

Vacuum's own maintenance contract is unique in the business. Under this contract *Vacuum* undertakes to carry out all necessary repairs free of charge at the customer's own home during the first two years. Only if an appliance cannot be repaired at home it will be taken away to *Vacuum's* workshops. After this two-year period, the company's contractual obligations decrease with the age of the appliance. These maintenance and repair operations are contractual, but anyone can make use of *Vacuum's* service division, even without a contract. Then, however, the customer must pay for labor and parts, and a call-out charge.

Parts are needed for all repairs, and *Vacuum* has enough parts in stock to ensure that maintenance and repair are carried out as quickly as possible. This is because there is a 2-month waiting period between order and delivery. This long delivery period is the main reason the company is not keen about selling separate parts, although it will do so at the customer's request.

3 The market

The local town (40,000 inhabitants) forms *Vacuum's* potential market. There are three competitors in the town now, dealing in both domestic and industrial appliances with reasonable success. Given the market volume and the number of competitors, the town has room for one more outlet for domestic appliances. The competition has a distribution network one and a half times the size of *Vacuum's*, but they have not yet discovered the lucrative aspects of the maintenance and repair contract. The sales are replacement sales. The shortage of goods means that the customer makes few demands as to type, color, shape, etc.; the goods are only required to be "of Western manufacture and at a low price" (a consumer purchasing problem).

4 Purchasing and selling

Articles are purchased from one of our neighboring countries, there is a 2-week delivery period, and payment should be cash on delivery. This last requirement is increasingly creating difficulties. Then too, several local manufacturers are producing better-quality goods at lower prices, but consumer demand is unfortunately limited to Western products. The purchase of parts takes considerably longer - usually about two months between order and delivery.

Products in the lower price categories move particularly rapidly, with a turnover rate of five days being the rule rather than the exception. Direct payment for purchases means that *Vacuum* cannot reserve too much stock. None of the goods in this group have yet proved to be dead

stock. The average gross profit per article is about 10% in this segment of the market.

The customers' limited purchasing power means that sales at the more expensive end of the market are a long way below the managing director's expectations. The turnover rate is about two months. These expectations were based in essence on a substantial economic recovery, and thus an increase in consumer purchasing power. The fact that sales have not increased means that businesses have been left with a large stock of this group of goods on their hands. This stock represents a considerable proportion of the invested capital. The average gross profit per article in this segment of the market is about 30%.

The maintenance and repair contract is a first-rate earner: About 75% of customers enter a *Vacuum* contract when they buy a large appliance (washing machine, or refrigerator). Customer claims make up about 60% of the contract price; thus, the net return is 40%.

Non-contractual services remain far below expectations. This has not yet been looked into, but the managing director believes that the following factors are involved:

- unfamiliarity with *Vacuum* name (estimated at 40%)
- unfamiliarity with the services offered
- too expensive (not yet investigated).

5 Financial situation

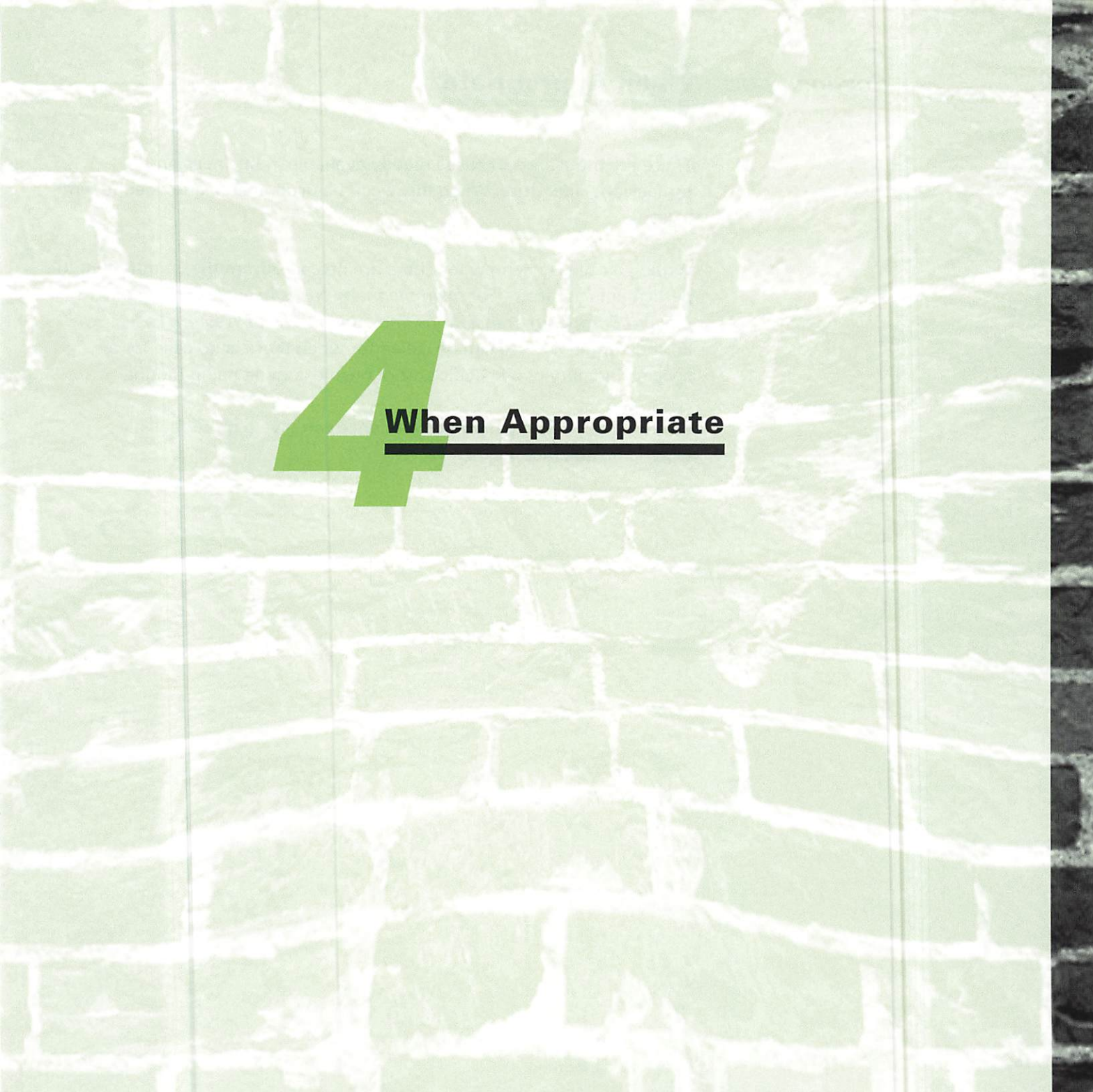
The financial situation does not look particularly bright. Everything is self-financed, but this is not a bottomless well, and the bottom is now coming into sight. Borrowing is always a possibility, given the value of the stock (ample security is available); set against this, however, is the 60% interest rate.

6 Strategy and the future

The outlook is still for a strengthened economy and an increase in consumer purchasing power. When that happens, the managing director expects an enormous demand for products from the more expensive end of the market, with increased customer discrimination regarding products in the lower price categories. The competition is not focusing on the upper end of the market, so *Vacuum* has the chance to take up a favorable position. It is also rumored that another two competitors may be considering setting up in the town.

The decline in returns, the build-up of stock in the more expensive products, the continuing stagnation of economic growth, and the gradual deterioration in the liquid assets position all combine to make the managing director take a gloomy view of the future. However, he must now give the situation thorough consideration and take action where necessary to prevent his brainchild from going under. A number of options are open to him...

What are the key problems that the managing director faces?



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When Appropriate

Section Four: When Appropriate

There are thousands of cases readily available in business and professional literature. When these can be used, there is no need to write a case.

Writing a case is useful when there are no cases from the country that the participants are from. *For example many cases used in Central and Eastern Europe are translations and adaptations of Western cases.* Further, original cases can be called for when there is no case for a specific industry or a specific sort of business issue being taught.

Writing a case from personal experience can give a more realistic experience to students.



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How to Develop

Section Five: How to Develop

For the purposes of this booklet only cases for the short case method will be written.

Review the qualities of a good case study. First what it is not: it is not merely an exercise, it is not a role play, it is not an example, it is not a simulation, it is not a scenario, it is not a problem and it is not a way to get the correct answer.

Then what it is: it poses a dilemma, it has no correct answer though there may be one better answer, it is based on reality, it includes opinions and prejudices as well as facts, it is complex, it is created for students to analyze in a group discussion, it is 1 to 20 pages in length.

Worksheet 1

- 1 Write down a clear teaching objective for the session(s). State what theory or thinking skills or processes the participants are to practice using in the case.
- 2 Brainstorm possible situations from personal experience that may be used to reach the teaching objective. Select the most likely one.
- 3 State the dilemma in the selected situation. *For example, apple farmers in a developing country could not grow a more profitable variety of apple because a five year loss in income would be ruinous. Meanwhile, because of changing markets, the variety they were growing was losing market share.*
- 4 In the center column in Worksheet #1, list the aspects of the dilemma.
- 5 Brainstorm all of the elements of the selected situation. What happened in the situation? What groups and people were involved?

What happened before and after the events being described? What are the emotions in the situation? What are the technical, organizational, and historical aspects of the situation? What were financial, political, educational, cultural dimensions?

- 6 Next to each aspect of the dilemma, list the information that the manager received that indicated that aspect. *In the apple farmers example, it is generally known that bank interest rates are 60% per year. They are told by wholesalers that prices are higher for other varieties.*

Worksheet 2

- 1 Write down, in the briefest form, the essence of the case.
- 2 Organize the brainstormed elements into "social and historical information"; "organizational background information" and "information received by the manager".
- 3 Order the "information received by the manager" and the "information indicating aspects" of the dilemma in the sequence in which it came to the manager. The data should not be a statement of the problems or any other form of analysis but just data. They can include facts, opinions expressed and prejudices.

Worksheet 3

- 1 Write a draft of the case in story form using the details from the brainstorm list and the data. Generally the story should be in the sequence the data were put in. This first draft should be 1 or 2 pages long. Normally, social and historical background is put at the beginning of the case, followed by an overview of the organization and finally information about the situation.

- 2 Write out questions and comments that are important to the discussion.
- 3 Edit the first draft. Check if the solution isn't too easy. Is all of the information in the case?
- 4 Ask a colleague to read the draft and solve the problem. Make changes to the draft.
- 5 Write the final draft.

The case study workshop method is in the second case study booklet, The Case Study Method.



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Worksheets

Case Study Worksheet 1
ToT

Session Teaching Objective in sentence form		
Brainstorm situations from personal experience		
The selected situation		
The dilemma		
Elements of Situation	Aspects of the Dilemma	Information indicating aspect

Case Study Worksheet 2
ToT

Essence of the Case:		
Social and Historical Information	Organizational Background Information	Information received by the Manager

Case Study Worksheet 3
ToT

Draft of the Case:	Key Question



Tips for Developing and Using

Section Seven: Tips for Developing and Using

In writing a short case, care has to be taken to include all the necessary information without giving preference to an answer to the problem. Misleading information can be included as long as it is possible for the participants to solve the problem. Information that just demonstrates the cleverness of the faculty is not conducive to training.

Case studies have to do with the *application* of theoretical models or practical skills.

8

References

Section Eight: **References**

"An Introductory Course in Teaching Training Methods for Management Development" by International Labour Office, Geneva.

"Models of Teaching" by Bruce Joyce, Marsha Weil and Beverly Showers, fourth edition, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1992.

Notes