Making the Case Method Work for You

The Case Method

During your time in business school, you will be exposed to a wide range of learning opportunities. These opportunities will take many forms—the interpersonal and teamwork skills you’ll build in study groups, the career reflection process, the interactions you’ll have with your peers and other members of the MBA community, and of course, the classroom experience, to name a few. While you’ll encounter several methods of instruction, perhaps none is as holistic, practical, and engaging as the case method.

The case method is relevant to management education for several reasons. First, it exposes you to a wide range of real business problems faced by companies of all sizes representing all kinds of industries. Developing your awareness of the types of challenges faced by managers will both expose you to interesting business situations and increase your overall business acumen. Second, it allows you to develop a number of analytical tools. For example, one case may require you to digest 15 pages of explanatory text interspersed with charts and tables, understand quotes from company management and customers, and analyze 7-8 qualitative and quantitative exhibits. It can be challenging and exhilarating to perform a sound analysis of a case.

This last point gives rise to the third reason for the case method’s relevance: It gives you an opportunity to step into the shoes of a member of the highlighted company’s management (the protagonist) and answer the questions, “what would I do in this situation, how would I do it, and why?” The problems in most cases do not belong to a “company” per se, but rather to a key member of management accountable for navigating an issue within an organization. As such, you will not only analyze industry, financial, and competitor dynamics, but you’ll need to consider the organizational and personal implications of the actions you recommend.

Because the case method is an interactive experience, you will learn a great deal not only from your own analysis and the comments of your professors, but also from the contributions and experiences of your classmates. Each person in the room has had a unique set of experiences that will shape the lens through which he or she views the case. You and your peers will have the chance to develop clear communication skills (listening, asking questions, speaking, inspiring, to name a few) by succinctly presenting your analyses, recommendations, and opinions. The diversity of perspectives in the discussion of a case can be one of the most valuable learning experiences in the classroom.
Finally, although the case method is demanding, it can also be a great deal of fun. The environment of debate and discussion based on sound analysis is what attracts many to the business world, and the case method certainly reflects this environment. Many current and former MBA students rate case discussions as one of the greatest contributors to their learning and overall experience at business school.

Like most things in life, the case method creates value commensurate with the amount of effort that you devote. Your professor will come to class each day fully prepared and with a comprehensive teaching plan. The plan will attempt to achieve a logical progression through the key issues in the case. It is imperative that each student also comes prepared for class. It’s important that you treat your involvement in the case method as a commitment to learning—for yourself, your peers, and your professor. Comprehensive preparation and analysis, along with participation and discussion, will help ensure that you and your colleagues get the most out of each case discussion—simply trying to “wing it” will rarely allow you to learn much or add value to the discussion. The remainder of this note is devoted to a discussion of strategies for excelling in these two areas during your time in the MBA program.

Preparation and Analysis

A general adherence to the tenets outlined below will ensure that you both perform a rigorous analysis and ready yourself for contributing in the classroom environment.

1. **Review any questions/focus areas in the syllabus.** For many cases, professors will focus the discussion by outlining 3-5 issues for which students should focus during case readings. Even though these focus areas do not have to be the only areas you explore, you should be sure to give them due consideration, so that you may analyze the issue(s) the professor had in mind and be prepared for the subsequent classroom discussion.

2. **Briefly skim the case and appendices.** In this initial read, your goal should be to familiarize yourself with the case context and content at a high level. What is the case about? What kind of business is being highlighted? What is the protagonist’s issue? What kind of information do you have? What are some questions you have as you read the case? Depending on your learning style, you may find it helpful to review the appendices (which normally contain relevant charts and tables) before reading the body of the case.

3. **Read the case thoroughly.** This is your main read of the case. Though you should focus on certain areas as outlined in step 2 above, and though every case is different, some typical areas of focus are:
   - What is (are) the main problem(s) to be addressed?
   - What alternatives should be considered to address the problem?
   - What are the pros and cons of each alternative?
   - What course of action do you recommend?

In addressing these problems, you might want to consider the key characteristics of the macro environment, the company’s industry, the purpose (or mission) of the company, its strengths and weaknesses, and its competitors as well as its financial situation.

4. **Make notes as you write.** Since you will be digesting a lot of information as you read, it may help to record thoughts as they occur to you. What types of analyses might seem important to consider? Are any areas of the case unclear or confusing? What insights and ideas strike you as you are reading? What seem to be the key drivers of the business problem? You may also find it helpful to summarize particularly long or complex information passages so that you do not have to re-read dense portions of the case later.

5. **Prepare an “elevator speech” summary.** This is a test of your overall understanding of the case. You should be able to sum up your reading of the entire case in less than 30 seconds. Often, a professor kicks off a case discussion by asking a student to do just this, much as a
manager might in a company meeting. Composing a quick “elevator speech” will help ensure that you have captured everything you feel is relevant at a macro level.

6. **Determine appropriate analyses.** Beginning with the key business problem(s), ask yourself what type(s) of analyses will start to help you arrive at conclusions and recommendations. These analyses can be either qualitative or quantitative or both. For example, you may want to prepare a financial forecast or calculate a breakeven production quantity; alternatively, a decision tree or customer segmentation analysis may make more sense.

7. **Determine relevant, irrelevant, and missing information.** One of the values of the case method is that it requires you to sift through detail to figure out what is relevant and important to the case at hand. Real management situations don’t present themselves as neatly packaged problems. Usually, you have to prune the facts down to an approachable scope so that you can logically confront a problem. What is relevant? Extraneous? Missing from the case?

8. **Conduct analyses.** For quantitative analysis, you may be able to generate desired insights by, for example, understanding a company’s financial statements, by calculating market share by channel, or considering some other set of information. However, you may have to dig more deeply and consider more intricate analyses. Be sure to consider relevant time periods, understand when to project vs. consider historical data, and check your work. For qualitative analysis, ensure that your work is thoughtful, rational, and insightful. For all types of analysis, make sure that your work is backed up by data from the case, that you add your own assumptions and perspectives when necessary and appropriate, and that you focus on solving the business problem(s) presented in the case.

9. **Develop alternatives.** As you consider the information in the case and the insights from your analyses, what resolutions are possible? You may create a number of approaches—some simple and straightforward, some innovative and revolutionary. Carefully determine the pros and cons of the various approaches that come to mind. Resist the temptation to conduct outside research as to what actually happened, as this tends to distract your thinking, requires valuable time, and does not aid in the learning and discovery process.

10. **Develop recommendations.** Of all the alternatives you considered, what should the protagonist do in the short/medium term? Long term? Why? What are the concrete steps that you recommend taking? When should he/she take them? Be sure to think about the problem in the way that makes the most sense to you, and balance innovative potential solutions with practical considerations germane to the company.

11. **Engage your study group.** Because you will often become so intimate with your own views of a case, it is worthwhile to discuss each case with your study group. Spending time explaining your views—and listening to theirs—can add color to your understanding of a case prior to class discussion. It will also allow you to practice succinctly presenting your analyses and conclusions before presenting them to a larger group.

**Participation and Discussion**

Discussion provides the richness and depth that makes the case study a unique mode of learning. Some key tenets to remember include the following:

- Students are teachers. The best learning comes when you share your insights with your classmates.
- Questions are vital. They are the starting point of discovery and thought.
- Disagreement is good. If we don’t have spirited disagreement, then we may not completely understand the problem.
- Wide participation is better than dominance by a few. If you participate frequently, consider limiting your comments to the most essential. If you’re a quiet student, you have much to contribute to the learning process—consider taking a risk and speaking out.
• Thinking is equally important as acquiring knowledge. What you think is just as important as what your instructors think and what your guests think. Substantial learning occurs when we are all prompt, present, prepared and participating.

The following strategies will help you and your colleagues maximize your learning during a case-based discussion.

1. **Understand everyone’s roles.** Unlike in a traditional lecture, the professor leading a case discussion is a “conductor” responsible for orchestrating and facilitating the case discussion. Students, who are the “symphony” under the professor’s direction, should provide their contributions and make efforts to continually deepen the discussion. Everyone in the room has shared responsibility for listening, contributing, and learning.

2. **Prepare to contribute.** In some instances, professors will randomly ask students to participate during each class session. This request may be for a brief summary of the case, an opinion, a quantitative calculation, a reaction to a classmate’s comment, or a summary of your recommendations. This approach helps to keep the discussion alive, and it gives everyone an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of his or her thinking. Though “cold calling” or “warm calling” (where you have some advance warning) can be stressful, it is often cited by students (and professors) as one of the key drivers of engagement and learning in an MBA program.

3. **Listen well.** This is much more difficult than it appears. Though it is fine to go through your notes or analyses during the discussion, you should take care not to “check out” of the discussion while doing so. Because of the pace of discussion, you may find yourself lost if you become disengaged for an extended period of time. Stay conscious of your thoughts, maintain an open but critical mind, and make sure you understand your classmates’ contributions. Acting in accordance with the maxim, “listen first, talk later” can help you make valuable contribution to any case discussion.

4. **Speak clearly.** This is an underrated element of speaking within a classroom among a large group. You need to enunciate well, project your voice so as to be heard by everyone in the room, and speak quickly enough to be engaging yet slowly enough to be understood. Practicing with a small team or with your study group can help you improve in this area.

5. **Move the discussion forward.** If you raise your hand (which you should do visibly) and are called upon to answer a question or make a comment, do so in such a way that you add to the discussion. Do not make a point you wanted to make ten minutes prior simply to introduce the thought, as it is likely no longer relevant. Build off the remarks of your classmates, but do not needlessly repeat. As a general rule, make remarks that provide new, value-added perspectives to the discussion to deepen the collective understanding of the class.

6. **Use evidence from the case.** Strive to point to data, exhibits, analysis, or quotes/text from the case in your responses. Clearly express your views and weave in commentary where it makes sense, but remember that business decisions tend to be a combination of rigorous, fact-based logic, creativity and personal belief—this balance should be appropriately reflected in your contributions.

7. **Engage your peers.** Since accountability for a successful discussion rests with the professor and the students, do not feel as if you need to address all of your comments to the professor. Speak to everyone in the room, moving your head around and using appropriate body language when necessary. Ask others to clarify their positions if you do not understand them or need more information. Most important, do not hesitate to challenge others’ comments and perspectives. Sometimes you will disagree with a viewpoint, or feel that an unjustifiable statement has been made. When this happens, feel free to deepen the discussion by asking a classmate to defend a contribution.

8. **Take risks.** You have a unique opportunity to take risks and make mistakes during business school. Consider making comments when you have an opinion. Challenge the status quo. Test new ideas. Make comments that integrate material from past classes or from other courses.
Consider making comments that reflect cumulative learning from the course (or other courses) rather than considering each case in isolation.

9. **Do not try to drive to the “right” answer.** There is typically no “right” answer; there are several thoughtful, evidence-based solutions. Though a manager or company will obviously have chosen one path, this does not imply that the “best” decision was reached. In fact, the analysis and discussion of a variety of solutions to a single case often adds a great deal to the learning process. The purpose of a case discussion is to use a combination of logic and creativity to offer insights that educate you about the process of arriving at a solution, not the correctness of the solution itself.

10. **Look to learn.** The case method represents a unique opportunity to take risks, make mistakes, and learn. Though you may find after a discussion that your recommendations and solutions were perfectly appropriate, you may sometimes need to refine analyses and conclusions after new data and perspectives come to light. Do not feel that you have erred by having to make these adjustments; it is a natural part of learning. In addition, ensure that you understand both the requisite level of analytical detail required for a successful analysis of the case as well as the high-level takeaways. Follow up after the discussion with classmates who made points that you found particularly interesting or insightful—this helps to develop relationships and can add depth to your understanding of the issue in the case. Finally, take some time after the discussion to reflect on the applications of the case to your skill set and management style. You may have learned something along the way that you didn’t perceive as you were performing your analysis and engaging in discussion. You might even choose to keep a list of key “takeaways” from each of the cases you analyze and discuss—an aggregation of these messages may be valuable to you in the future.

**Conclusion**

The case method is a rich learning method, and it will be an excellent complement to the host of other learning opportunities you encounter during your time as an MBA student. Cases typically do not have a correct answer; if they did, they wouldn’t serve as interesting and dynamic education tools. However, the open-ended nature of cases implies a great deal of responsibility for those who participate in this learning method. Thorough preparation and analysis, coupled with thoughtful and appropriate communication in classroom discussions, will allow you to get the most out of the case method and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior required to become an excellent manager.