How to Consume a Raw Case Study

Studying case studies

The time for the Yale School of Management MBA program was fast approaching. So, Ashley Smith cleared her afternoon to go through the materials that had been sent by the program staff. Many of the assignments that Smith had been asked to prepare were case studies. So she settled into an armchair and began reading:

Over the years, Merck & Co. built an enviable reputation not just as a paragon of the pharmaceutical industry but as one of America’s most admired businesses. The company produced medical breakthrough after medical breakthrough, engaged in extensive philanthropy, and instituted progressive human resource policies, all the while delivering stellar financial performance. And yet, after withdrawing its blockbuster drug Vioxx in September of 2004, Merck found its reputation and its financial stability in danger. The day after the announcement, Merck’s stock plunged 30% and a few analysts even wondered if Merck would be forced into bankruptcy.

Smith was confused. She wasn’t in the pharmaceutical industry, nor was she particularly interested in medicine. Besides, Merck’s problems were old news – she remembered hearing about this a few years ago and so the case hardly seemed fresh. Smith put the Merck case aside and looked to the next assignment.

The second case was one of Yale’s highly-touted online, “raw” cases. Smith opened her laptop and typed in the url provided by the syllabus. The web site she arrived at was daunting. The case was about a solar electricity company in India. Smith counted over 20 separate pages, each with text, videos, documents, and links to other websites. The topics treated in the various tabs ranged from technical aspects of solar electricity, to the company’s financials to the income distribution in India. Her heart sank – there seemed no way she could read, much less master, all this material in the limited study time she had available.

Just a few minutes into her study session, Smith felt baffled and discouraged. Why was she being asked to read about topics that seemed so far afield from her particular background? The cases dealt with events that had happened many years ago – they hardly seemed to be descriptions of cutting-edge management techniques. What was the point? Even if Smith were to read the assignments, how was she going to prepare for class? How can she possibly remember all these names and events?

Why case studies?

The case study method of instruction has both bedeviled and enlightened students of management for nearly one hundred years. The method was first introduced at the Harvard Business School and has in various forms spread throughout the world of business schools.

The model for management case studies comes from the medical grand rounds. In grand rounds as those who are familiar with medical shows knows, a senior doctor presents a patient to a group of medical interns or residents. The interns then gather information from the patient such as vital signs and the results of tests. They ask the patient about medical history and
symptoms. Based on this information, the interns begin to make a diagnosis about the problem. They may ask for further tests or they could offer various courses of treatment. All under the guidance and tough questioning of the senior doctor.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to wheel a company into a management classroom for a similar exercise. Therefore, case writers and faculty visit companies, interview managers and collect data and then write up a narrative about what they saw. The resulting case is “the patient” that management students can analyze and diagnose. They may also be asked to formulate a plan of action for the company in question.

Of course, there are differences between medical grand rounds and management case studies. One obvious difference is that (thankfully) no one is at risk in a management classroom, no matter how poor the diagnosis or action plan. Another is that since organizations consist of a number of people and viewpoints, cases are sometimes written from the point of view of a particular decision-maker in the organization. The case writer will attempt to put the reader into the shoes of a manager and ask what should the manager do?

The paragraphs above have followed the traditional setup of a case study. The decision maker, in this case, Smith, faces a dilemma and has to plan a course of action. And the challenge was not in the question she had asked. No matter how much time she had to study, she would not have discovered the one "right" answer, or benefited by memorizing the story. In a typical case study, the 10 to 15 pages of text and data exhibits do not provide the outcome of the story, but instead give the reader a overview of the information that a decision maker might use as he or she thinks about a specific problem, as well as background information on the company and its environment. The case then asks the student to answer specific questions, all relating to, "What should the manager do?"

A case study is based on actual events, although names and data may be disguised. Ideally, a case problem has no perfect answer for students to uncover or for professors to reveal. And outside research is not the solution – knowing what actually happened does not prove that the choice was optimal. Preparation for classes using this problem-based approach requires each student to come to a recommended decision or course of action and be able support it using the facts, available data, underlying issues, and the implications of the recommendation and alternatives. Outlining several options, an analysis of costs and benefits, may make it possible to support one path. Tools and principles developed in classes or experienced in other settings may bolster or challenge arguments supporting a given approach.

Case studies give students experience in making decisions by analyzing the specifics of a wide range of situations and significant factors. No one student can marshal all the facts or recognize all the pitfalls suggested in a case study, but every student can learn new skills for making appropriate analyses, drawing conclusions, and supporting recommendations against challengers. For many students, hearing the opinions and perspectives that others bring to class can be as strong a learning experience as the initial analysis.

Ashley can expect the class session to move from specifics of the case situation to the business tools and management concepts that the discussion has revealed. Student input and observations and questions from the professor will provide new tools and skills for analyzing future situations.

**Why raw cases?**

The Yale School of Management has developed online, “raw” case studies. A raw case provides a multidimensional approach to the analysis of management challenges. It presents information in a variety of ways – reports, articles, interviews, videos, photographs, original documents, and links to other
What is the best way to approach a case?

Both written and online cases start with introductory material, on the opening page of a written case or the left-most section of an online case. These provide an overview of the dilemma and the discussion questions that need to be answered. Instructors may also give a set of questions and even highlight which sections of the case are particularly relevant to class discussion.

In written or “cooked” cases, the text summarizes background and a set of facts for reaching conclusions, along with graphics and data in exhibits. In raw or online cases, in addition to expository text, there are links to key documents and supporting data and connections to additional background and contextual information. Descriptions often suggest which links are crucial for understanding and which are available for those who want to follow the topic on a deeper level. There may also be slideshows of photographs, drawings, or other images, that provide the context for the issues in a case. There is a lot of information in a raw case, requiring students to prioritize what they look at and read. Often students working in groups divide responsibilities for what each person will examine and then report back to the group to synthesize everyone’s responses.

In online cases where there are video components, watching the videos is integral to understanding the case study. Videos introduce you to the protagonists of the case study and provide more information on the dilemmas under consideration. Some case studies have YouTube versions of the videos to allow for faster downloads of the material.

So what should Ashley do? As with any case study, this final paragraph will not provide the answers or even spell out the learning objectives of the case study. But by the end, Ashley should at least be able to identify the most important facts and challenges presented by the unique situation described in the case and outline one or two tentative conclusions or directions. She can draw on specifics from the case to support, challenge, or change those conclusions. She will get feedback from a study group or from class to test her ideas against others and draw on new tools to sharpen her analysis, just in time for the next case.