

What the Case Study Method Really Teaches

Cases teach students how to apply theory in practice and how to induce theory from practice.

The case method cultivates the capacity for:

1. critical analysis
2. judgment
3. decision-making, and
4. action

STEP 1: PREPARATION

- Lecturer – be prepared!
- Students: several hours reading, highlighting, and debating cases before class, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups

STEP 2: DISCERNMENT

- The case method forces students to identify and focus on what's essential, ignore the noise, skim when possible, and concentrate on what matters
- These are meta-skills required for every busy executive confronted with the paradox of simultaneous information overload and information paucity.

STEP 3: BIAS RECOGNITION

- Students often have an initial reaction to a case stemming from their background or earlier work and life experiences. For instance, people who have worked in finance may be biased to view cases through a financial lens.
- However, effective general managers must understand and empathize with various stakeholders, and if someone has a natural tendency to favor one viewpoint over another, discussing dozens of cases will help reveal that bias. Armed with this self-understanding, students can correct that bias or learn to listen more carefully to classmates whose different viewpoints may help them see beyond their own biases.
- Recognizing and correcting personal bias can be an invaluable meta-skill in business settings when leaders inevitably have to work with people from different functions, backgrounds, and perspectives.

STEP 4: JUDGMENT

- Cases put students into the role of the case protagonist and force them to make and defend a decision. The format leaves room for nuanced discussion, but not for waffling: Teachers push students to choose an option, knowing full well that there is rarely one correct answer.
- It enables them to develop the judgment of making decisions under uncertainty, communicating that decision to others.

STEP 5: COLLABORATION

- Discussing cases in small study groups, and then in the classroom, helps students practice the meta-skill of collaborating with others.
- Orchestrating a good collaborative discussion in which everyone contributes, every viewpoint is carefully considered, and yet a thoughtful decision is made in the end is the arc of any good case discussion.
- Although teachers play the primary role in this collaborative process during their time at the school, it is an art that students of the case method internalize and get better at when they get to lead discussions.

STEP 6: CURIOSITY

- Cases expose students to lots of different situations and roles. Across cases, they get to assume the role of entrepreneur, investor, functional leader, or CEO in a range of different industries and sectors. Each case offers an opportunity for students to see what resonates with them, what excites them, what bores them, and which roles they could imagine inhabiting in their careers.
- Cases stimulate curiosity about the range of opportunities in the world and the many ways that students can make a difference as leaders.

STEP 7: SELF-CONFIDENCE

- Students must inhabit roles during a case study that far outstrip their prior experience or capability, often as leaders of teams or entire organizations in unfamiliar settings. “What would you do if you were the case protagonist?” is the most common question in a case discussion.
- Even though they are imaginary and temporary, these “stretch” assignments increase students' self-confidence that they can rise to the challenge.



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