

DEVELOPING CASE STUDIES

BY BRADFORD
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Using short case studies in training sessions has long been heralded by training directors and conference leaders as an ideal means of developing the involvement that trainees need. A good instructor knows that the case study method gives the trainee an opportunity to test his feelings, opinions and attitudes in the permissive climate of the conference room. He also creates an atmosphere in which he can gauge the depth of knowledge the group has in the area under discussion, thus enabling him to pace his instruction to the group's ability to move forward.

Through the medium of the case study, then, the trainer can demonstrate his respect for the trainee as an adult learner and stimulate him to participate in other learning experiences. In short, he motivates the learner.

The problem facing any competent trainer is to find exactly the right case to develop the principle he wants to teach. Certainly case

studies, or any other method of group involvement are not chosen simply to create conversation without direction. Training sessions are not built around case studies. Rather the case is selected or written to introduce the group to the principles the instructor wants to teach. It should lead the group to conclusions he wants developed. If the case is used to supplement a well structured training session; if it is geared to the industry in which the group works; and if it presents facts, situations and attitudes that the trainee can accept as true to life, then the right case is very difficult to find. To meet all these criteria usually means the trainer looks to many sources and then either compromises or winds up writing his own. Thus, the logical question — why not write our own?

Typical responses might be, "It's a lot of work," or "I don't have the kind of talent it takes to write a case." Each of these might be true, but only if proven to one's satisfaction after a couple of systematic approaches to the problem. Actually writing a case can be easier

and less time consuming than finding just the right one. Usually, any training man who can plan an effective session or program, can write a good case for the groups attending his training meetings.

The first mental barrier to be hurdled is where does one find the material and the second is how does one go about writing a case. Let's take them one at a time.

Case Study Resources

Literally, the training man is up to his proverbial ears in resource material for case study development. If he is at all close to the training needs of his organization, the situations are right there waiting for description and discussion. High frequency, for example, of fork lift truck accidents suggests a case situation for safety training. High absenteeism, tardiness, or turnover provide leads to the development of a case which pinpoints the attitudes underlying these conditions. We all give lip service to the doctrine of identifying training needs as the first duty of a good training director. As we identify needs, we build case study

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resources.

Arbitration cases provide excellent resource material for either a case study or its first cousin, the incident process. In the same manner grievance hearings and discipline problems can be the focal points around which provocative cases are written. Difficulties encountered in the installation of new methods, policies, rules, and procedures offer still more opportunities to build realistic case studies. Any deviations from standard performance such as recurring drops in production volume, increases in unit costs, or frequent failure to meet quality standards are clues to problems which become the basis of good cases for training.

Training directors are often consulted by their management associates and trainees concerning problems they have in their departments or with their bosses. These, too, in the aggregate give the training director insight into the human relations problems of his organization. A trainer sensitive to the feelings and attitudes of individuals he associates with soon learns to build their opinions and reactions into cases which are enthusiastically attacked. Knowledge of how to disguise the real situation to protect the "guilty or innocent" is left to imagination of the developer of the case.

Now then, how does one go about the actual writing of a good short case for a training discussion? A simple six-step approach has proven very helpful in guiding even the totally inexperienced case writer to develop productive case studies. This approach was effective in the ASTD Institute at the University of Wisconsin when participants wrote well conceived cases under rigid time limitations in the somewhat noisy atmosphere of workshop activity.

In spite of the environmental handicaps, true pride in accomplishment was experienced by most training people present. Here, for example, are three typical written reactions following the session: "This was completely out of my area, but terrific for just personal benefit." "I realize now that cases can be prepared first

hand." "Although I have written case studies before, this session has given me a much easier method to develop them and a better sense of direction, plus an improved ability to write them."

Let's look at the six steps in *How to Write a Case Study*:

1. *Define the principles you are trying to bring a group to understand.* This first step is essential for it provides the foundation upon which the case is to be built. A good instructor does not use a case simply to stir up activity, he uses the case to bring his group to the recognition of a principle he is trying to teach. In this first step, then, the trainer sets forth the direction for his plan. Until he has defined what he wants his case to do for him, he has little valid reason for writing a case.

Example of a defined principle: Managers have a responsibility to keep others informed and cannot afford the attitude communication is a one-way street leading to them; and/or

Awareness of the need to communicate is the key factor in how well we communicate with one another.

2. *Establish a situation that illustrates the principle.* This step now begins to give the plans for writing some substance. It creates the setting in which the case is to take place. Here is where we call upon our knowledge and experience of typical problems and problem individuals around us.

Example: How about a manager whose attitude is that people around him create an endless array of problems because they can't or won't communicate with him.

3. *Develop the symptoms.* Those that illustrate positively, negatively or both, the principle to be taught. Now we begin to assemble the building materials on the site. What incidents and situations can we create or relate which are symptomatic of the attitude defined in step 2 and illustrate the principle identified in step 1?

Examples: a. How about the attitude expressed in the common complaint, "Nobody tells me anything."

b. The attitude expressed in the feeling that people everywhere have to cooperate with me if I'm going to do my job.

c. A situation in which the boss bypasses our "hero" by giving orders to his subordinates.

d. Reverse the situation — a subordinate goes over our "hero's" head to ask a favor of the boss.

e. There are countless examples of people misunderstanding "simple" instructions and creating disturbing foul-ups in the daily routine.

f. How often do we hear complaints because we don't get cooperation when we ask for special effort.

4. *Develop the characters.* These might be "do-righters," or "do-wrongers." Either can be true to life and provide realism for the case. Developing the characters is somewhat like assembling the finishing materials for the construction job. Listen to trainees describe their bosses, employees, peers, and associates. We live in a world of case study characters.

Example: a. Let's give our hero a name — Bill Newman is as good as any unless we are working with a group where names reflect a predominant nationality group. Then he might be a Stan Dombrowski or a Joe Fiore.

b. Place him in the management hierarchy. For this situation we might make Bill Newman a general foreman.

c. What is his attitude or outlook? Make him a "do-wronger" — impatient, wrapped up in himself, looks for others to blame when a problem arises, typical of "the guy upstairs who needs this training."

5. *Write the case.* From here on it's simple — construction begins. Build in the essentials. Describe the situation, the attitudes, the symptoms and the characters but don't overburden the case with detail. If the preparation outlined in the first four steps has been carefully done, the writing is almost automatic.

Example: "The Case of Bill Newman" which follows step 6 in this article.

6. *Conclude with questions.* They give direction to your group's thinking and provide your discussion a pathway to the principle. Questions should state specifically what we want considered and discussed so that trainees approach the problem along the lines the instructor intends to direct the discussion.

The Case of Bill Newman

Bill Newman, General Foreman, feels, "Communication at XYZ Controls Company stinks." He's

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ready to look for a new job. His feeling was that you can't do a job: (1) if you don't know what's expected of you; (2) if your supervisors are afraid to take initiative without having you dot every "i" and cross every "t"; (3) if changes are made without your knowing why; (4) if you're bogged down with a lot of unnecessary paperwork; (5) if the pressure is always on to get higher quality, more production and lower costs. "If the old man wants results, he's got to cooperate and keep me informed. I haven't got a crystal ball. And my supervisors — if they want me to go to bat for them — have got to keep me posted and give me a little cooperation. I can't do it all alone. Take last week for instance . . . this is typical. . ."

In checking over the production reports, Bill found that a job which should have been finished the day before was still in process. On checking with Jim Andrews, he was told that Jim had been given orders by the old man to rush a job for Crandon Electronics ahead of what was scheduled. He told Jim,

"You take orders from me and no one else! I can't have every Tom, Dick, and Harry coming in here and lousing up our schedules."

We went in to register a complaint with the boss in a nice way and got what amounted to a polite brush-off. "Bill, the job had to get out and you weren't around; I can't say any more than that."

Bill wonders: How in heaven's name can you run a department with cooperation like that?

Tuesday Bill got a couple of complaints about the way the second shift had left the place in a mess. He left a note saying, "Get this place cleaned up before you leave. I don't want any more complaints!"

Andy Colson, second shift supervisor, had the whole crew spend the last two hours cleaning house. No complaints the next morning. But Bill couldn't figure why the big drop in production Tuesday night. When he called Andy to find out what happened he blew his stack. Andy assumed that Top Brass had lowered the boom and figured Bill wanted a "spit and

polish" house cleaning.

"Who gives you the right to assume anything? Can't you follow a simple instruction?" Hangs up!

Stan Nelson, one of the supervisors, went to the superintendent and asked for a transfer to another section on the floor — a better opening created by a retirement. Bill was asked by the boss what he thought of granting Stan's request. Bill said he couldn't let Stan go and suggested Alex Devoe would be a better man. Actually Bill had considered Stan for the job, but it burned him up that Stan would go over his head without discussing it with him first.

When Bill asked Stan why he didn't come to him first, Stan said, "I thought I had a better chance with the old man. I wasn't sure how I stood with you." You know now," said Bill. "You'll wait a long time before you get another chance!"

Friday noon Bill was informed that a job scheduled to be finished on Monday would have to be out of the plant on Friday. So OK. We've got to work about two and a half

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hours' overtime, but we can do it. From 2:30 to 3:00 all he got was griping when he told three sections of the need to work until 6:00. Shopping, dinners parties, bowling, basketball games, school plays — why didn't he go to bat for them? Why couldn't they work Saturday morning? Why did he have to wait until an hour before quitting time?

Bill finally told them to quit the blasted griping and get the stuff out. How unreasonable could they

get? Can't they see that you have to accommodate a customer now and then to keep their good will?

To top it off, no one alerted shipping and the stuff didn't get out anyhow — how fouled up can you get?

- A. How do you think Bill saw his communication responsibility?
- B. What created the problem?
- C. What should Bill have done:
 1. To avoid the problem in the first place.

DEVELOPING CASE STUDIES: AN UPDATE

Thousands of supervisors have mentally and emotionally wrestled with the *Case of Bill Newman* used to illustrate this article. Most of them come out of those discussions with a new perception of the importance of communication to effective supervision. The years have reinforced the idea that case studies for specific training sessions are best written for those sessions by the trainers who will be using them.

The six-step method described in this article has guided the writing of many case studies for specific training sessions by the author as well as providing the framework for constructing the Burt Hall cases in my *Management-Minded Supervision*. Seminars on "How to Train and Develop Foremen and Supervisors" conducted for trainers at the University of Wisconsin's Management Institute have a segment built around this article which is as current today as when it was first published.

Repetitive use of a case such as the Bill Newman case creates insights from a variety of trainees that enrich each successive use of the case. For example, the first incident provides an excellent opportunity to move from a discussion of what might have been done to avoid the problem of Bill Newman not being informed of the change in priorities, to the more significant emotional reaction of Bill Newman being overlooked. We see a highly favorable emotional climate building around Bill damaging his relationships up and down the line, while very simple and obvious remedies are available to all parties to the misunderstanding.

In his note to Andy Colson, "get this place cleaned up before you leave. I don't want any more complaints!", the obvious lack of specific detail can be quickly set aside. Of much greater significance to the trainer is the opportunity to enter into discussions of oral vs. written instructions, the limitations of written communication, the impact of

non-verbal communication, and of whether Andy's response to the note amounted to "antagonistic compliance."

As the trainer becomes more familiar with the case, other methods such as role playing become apparent. Visualize, for example, asking trainees to plan and conduct a follow-up interview between Bill Newman and Stan Nelson after Bill learns of the by-pass. Giving trainees an opportunity to play Bill Newman while the trainer assumes the role of Stan Nelson keeps the trainer in control of the role play and enhances learning. If the trainee needs help, the trainer can be supportive. On the other hand if the trainee becomes too aggressive, the trainer can provide sufficient resistance to redirect the trainee along more productive lines.

Many case-study discussions flow logically into role-play possibilities to enliven a training session if the trainer is alert to them. More important, an awareness of role play in the mind of the trainer leads to writing case situations specifically for role play. Supervisors at University of Wisconsin institutes invariably ask for more role play whenever the method is used. They like the "real world" approach to learning.

On reviewing the article there are two aspects that need correction. First, the increasing entry of women into the training field makes the article outdated in its male orientation. My apologies to our many women trainers. Secondly, there is an implication that the six steps presented are rigidly sequential. Not so. My experience is that I jump back and forth between steps two, three and four before writing. The writing process usually triggers many new ideas for steps three and four. Carefully staying with the six steps will yield a good case similar to the case of Bill Newman in half a day. One could look for days and not find one that fits what we want to do nearly so well as the one we write.

— Bradford B. Boyd

2. To correct the problem once it developed.

The case of Bill Newman was written to introduce a seven-session series on "Building Cooperation Through Better Communication" for a midwestern manufacturing concern. The group included middle management personnel from production, office, and engineering functions.

The case was developed following the six step pattern outlined above to fit a special situation. Although he was a purely fictional character, most conferees felt they knew Bill Newman or that the situation was uncomfortably true to life.

It's unlikely that a canned case could have been found to do the job that Bill Newman was created to do — demonstrating that it's easier and quicker to develop our own.

Bradford B. Boyd is professor of management at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

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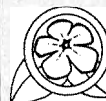
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