# Four by Four

# The Case Method

Are people "getting down to cases" in your training classes? The case method, which traces back to ancient Chinese, Hebrew, and Greek teachings that used parables and special questioning techniques, is still evolving.

The method's current name and form took general shape about a century ago at Harvard University. Over the years, Harvard and such schools as Yale University and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania have used and modified the method. These days, consultants, in-house trainers, and representatives of schools and training companies use the case method in countless organizations, combining it with other methods and modern media.

The case method centers on a *case* or *case report.* Training participants analyze the case individually, and then discuss and analyze it as a group. Benson P. Shapiro, author of Harvard Business School's *Hints for Case Teaching*, defines a case as "any description of a business situation in which is embodied a decision to be made. It can be a paragraph long to book-length." Typically, cases run from a few to two dozen pages.

Why use the case method? Shapiro cites the title of a still-popular 1940 Harvard publication: "Because Wisdom Can't Be Told." Shapiro explains that true wisdom is learned by doing, not by hearing, "which means an instructor cannot tell you things like management and judgment, but can only help you learn them." He says that readings and lectures are efficient for transmitting knowledge—but not for developing skills. Training literature associates the case method with participants' practice and improvement of skills in analysis, communication (listening, questioning, and persuading), interpersonal relations, problem solving, and decision making.

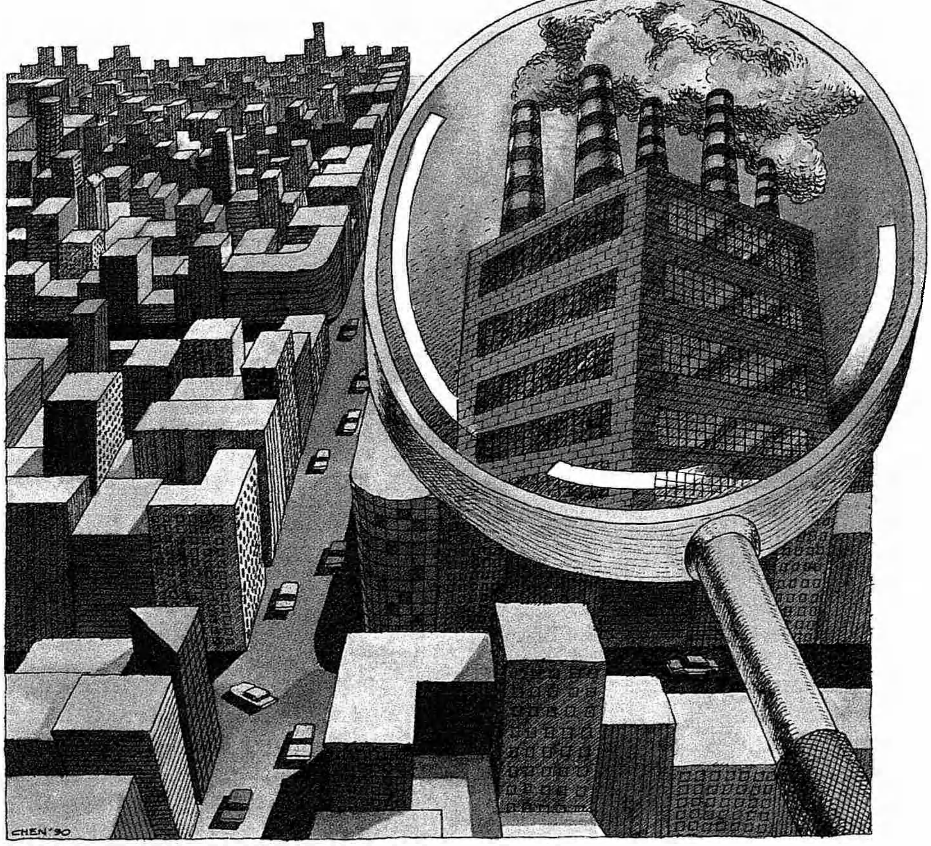
A case should fit the needs and issues of an organization and the skills of the participants and instructor or facilitator. Some cases deal with complex, strategic-level issues that are difficult to teach; other cases deal with narrower topics and are easier to teach. Fortunately, more people need to be exposed to the "simpler things" than to the more complex ones. As Shapiro puts it, there are few strategists in a company, but a lot of supervisors.

According to Shapiro, the tradeoff between complexity and realism versus effectiveness in the classroom and time is one reason why Harvard has more than 4,000 active cases, supported by printed materials and, sometimes, software and videos. It takes different cases to do different tasks.

What's more, Shapiro says, cases often have dozens of possible answers. Sometimes, none of the answers is very good. In some instances—for example, when the difficulties in a case relate to accounting or law—answers may be bounded by professional strictures.

Some people use the term *case study* to describe a case that provides an answer or set of answers. Other people use that term interchangeably with *case.* Whenever participants agree on a single answer quickly, chances are that the case is not well-crafted. Cases rarely have clear-cut answers, much less single, "right" answers. In cases pertaining to leadership, Shapiro points out, the validity of different options relates to the capacities and style of each individual. In other words, what works for you may not work for me—and vice versa.

This month, "Four by Four" asked four training experts when and how they use the case method, and when and how they would recommend it to other training and development specialists.



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"The case method is important because there just aren't nice, neat answers in life. You have to try to figure out some of the alternatives and the 'best bets,' and put down your resources accordingly"

*John Hurley is vice-president and director of corporate training and educational resources at Chase Manhattan Bank, 33 Maiden Lane, 25th Floor, New York, NY 10081.*

Most organizations in this country have several root problems—such as being too elitist, not being egalitarian or participative enough, and not having senior managers who communicate with people at lower levels and listen to them. All of those problems indicate opportunities for American corporations that can be embraced and dealt with in cases.

A well-written case helps lead people to complex problem solving. Intelligent people can see both sides of an issue and get to explore them broadly. The method is important because there just aren't nice, neat answers in life. You have to try to figure out some of the alternatives and the "best bets," and put down your resources accordingly. People get a chance to explore the gray areas of a case situation. That prepares them better for the complexities of real life than do some other methods.

At Chase, we use the case method with employees at all levels.

### *Hurley's recommendations*

1. Like most instructional methods, the case method is as good as the person using it. If you use the methodology well, the case method allows you to get away from the didactic approach and start placing the focus more on the learner.

If a case is well written, it brings people to a level that's meaningful. You can get people up to a good enough starting point so that they can discuss issues. If you don't do that—if you give a lecture—people usually line up along the points of the lecture. In the case-method process, people draw their own inferences.

2. The case and initial discussion of it are starting points. Cases have different degrees of realism, so people paint in details from their own experiences. A case is like Swiss cheese; the participants fill in the holes. Most people can fill in very well. I've heard John Kotter present cases based on two general managers. I recognized a manager I used to work with and myself, as described in the case. The participants filled in details that mirrored my experience in the actual situation.

3. One thing we try to do is to have the case oriented toward the organization as much as possible; that is to say, Chase or a unit within Chase. There's a great deal of learning about the cultural aspects of the organization in that. An organization-specific case is particularly rich, but a case doesn't have to be organization-specific to stimulate learning.

As you put cases together, you learn a lot about the organization. You learn in the writing of a case, and you learn in its teaching; people discussing the case learn through participating. They begin to understand the nuances of the organization: why this type of organizational structure impedes certain things, where the overlaps in the organization are and what it takes to get beyond them, and what the personal political issues are.

4. When we look at cases, they're often part of longer experiences. We weave all kinds of things in and out of a case, from working with personal computers to smaller leadership role plays. We've even used cases as a basis for assessment, usually self-assessment.

We follow up with different kinds of learning experiences that kick off from the case. We might say, "Hey, during the case you indicated that you might need to know more about a particular functional area." Whatever it is, we try to follow up with opportunities based on the learning about self that people found in the experience.

We shy away from just having "a Harvard guy" come in to lead the learning. We do have someone from Harvard come in, but we also have a functional expert and an organizational expert on hand to deal with learning that relates to their areas. Then we take learning to the personal level, usually by doing leadership studies and reflection. The way we use the case method, it's a simulation plus longer-term experience.

At the end of the case, after a week's experience related to it, participants work on a six-month project germane to the organization. They come back to figure out what they've learned from the project work; then they pick other opportunities for enrichment. They find out whether they need further development, either to move that project along or to move themselves ahead in the organization. So, there's a diagnostic aspect leading to more development. With other programs that use cases, we have other follow-up, both on the job and through getting people back together.

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> "Cases have to be presented in a non-threatening way. Tell people this is a chance for them to practice with accurate, realistic material. As they read through the cases, they should easily recognize the situations"

*Kermit H. Boston is vice-president of market development and training for McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 26th Floor, New York, NY 10020.*

We use cases in first-line management training, both for outside field managers and internal non-sales managers. Those would be editorial people, production people, and anyone who manages people who aren't in sales. These managers have serious responsibility in terms of coaching. We try to get them in our program within the first year of their promotion—because if we didn't do that, it might affect their potential for being good managers.

Our program runs three full, consecutive days. We use a video, "The Pygmalion Effect," from CRM to introduce what coaching is really about. Built on the George Bernard Shaw play that inspired "My Fair Lady," the video's cases show how that attitude works in business: as a coach, you're expected to expect great things from your people; if you do, great things can result. The video's cases set the stage.

We get publishing-specific on the second day, so participants read written cases in the evening of the first day. In one program, for example, there are three scenarios:

- a sales rep who's plateaued after 20-plus years;
- a young, aggressive person who's doing well but is impatient to be a manager;
- a person who is nothing special, just OK.

If you manage more than four or five people, you're probably going to have at least two of those three working for you. As managers go through the cases, they're going to see the company and their own people in a way that they can practice with.

In the program, someone plays the role of the employee in the case, someone plays the manager who is to coach that person, and someone is an observer. So, the person in the manager role gets feedback from the employee and the observer. As the employee, for instance, you'd want to tell the manager how it feels to have him or her come down hard on you, asking new things of you.

For salespeople, we try to get cases that represent the kind of customers they will be calling on and depict the kinds of problems those customers have. Then it becomes a question of how you as a successful salesperson would solve those problems.

### *Boston's recommendations*

**1.** Try to set up cases that are realistic with regard to the kinds of employees and situations with which people will be working.

We use an outside firm, The Forum Corporation. If you use consultants from outside your organization, you need to have them come in and get to understand your business before they write anything. In other words, they need to spend time with the people who will be depicted in the case and the ones who will use it. Your employees need to feel that the case writers and facilitators are going to present the case in a way that's authentic.

We had Forum come in and talk with actual field managers, salespeople, and internal managers to get a sense of who these people are and what kind of backgrounds they have. That made the cases much more realistic and doable.

**2.** If you contract out, you need a company with credibility. You need a company with a history of writing solid cases. When you read its generic cases, you get a feel for whether a company knows how to put a case together.

We do a combination of generic cases and cases adapted specifically for McGraw-Hill. Forum already had generic cases. After Forum's representatives had a chance to spend time with our managers, we asked them to adapt those cases to make them more publishing-directed.

**3.** Cases have to be presented in a non-threatening way. You have to tell people that this is a chance for them to practice with accurate, realistic material. As they read through the cases, they should see situations that they easily recognize.

We don't videotape practice sessions. They're all done at the same time; we're not sticking a group in front of the rest of the participants and saying, "Okay, you're 'on' for the next 20 minutes."

**4.** Follow-up. At the end of each practice session, people talk about what they did and why—the reason being that, before leaving the program, they put together plans for coaching the people who report to them. These plans are reviewed and analyzed by people who would understand why participants say they're going to do certain things.

Then there's a two-month follow-up appointment. I call participants, who tell me what happened with those plans. If the plans didn't work, we need to develop a sense of why they didn't.

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"Some writers put in tons of information and let students wallow around in it. That's all right in a two-year MBA program. But in the business world, time is precious and expensive; having customized cases is important"

*Jack E. Bowsher, 8 Norwood Lane, Westport CT 06880, has retired as director of education at IBM and now does consulting. He is author of* Educating America: Lessons Learned in the Nation's Corporations *(John Wiley & Sons, 1989).*

At IBM, we used cases in management development, marketing, finance, planning, and the Advanced Business Institute. We don't use them

***Bowsher's recommendations***

**1.** After you've taught the facts and figures, when you want to get across more than one subject-matter area and to get learners to apply facts and knowledge, that's when you use cases.

Cases and case studies are excellent vehicles for teaching interdisciplinary subjects. For instance, in marketing, if you have taught people basic selling skills, product knowledge, and applications, bring those together in a case. Then, when marketers go out to meet the customers, they've already been thinking of their new knowledge and skills in terms of a working environment that brings together all the lessons of several disciplines.

**2.** There are two schools of thought about whether you should use actual cases or constructed cases. I believe that some of the best cases take an instructional-design approach. You ask, "What are the lessons I want to teach in this case?" and then use material that's part fact and part fiction. In other words, you use facts when they exist; when they don't, you make up a few. The reason I believe these can be better cases is that they're more efficient. You get to the heart of a subject.

Case writers sometimes put in tons of information and let students wallow around in all kinds of miscellany with the challenge of figuring out what three or four issues have to be brought out. That's all right in a two-year MBA program in which students' time is looked on as free. But in the business world—where time is precious and expensive—having customized, intructional-design-type cases is important. But not many people do it that way.

**3.** You have to run cases in a disciplined way. If people think that they're not going to be called on to participate or that if they haven't read the case nothing will be said, they may start easing back. You have to get the message across that there will be a lot of penetrating questions and discussions. The case method can get sloppy. That's something you have to guard against by putting structure into it.

**4.** The traditional way was to give participants a written case. These days you might use video to make a case more exciting. Now you can have, say, a former CEO or executives from the actual situation appear on video to say, "Let me tell you what really went on" or "Let me tell you what happened after the case was written." Or, a video can be a "plant tour" or show part of the company. The basic information is still usually in a printed case document, but video can really bring it to life.

for technical subjects like engineering. In my experience, adults usually like a well-run case because it allows them to discuss real issues.

> "The fact of the matter is that we have more than a dozen learning vehicles; our customers gave cases the lowest marks"

*Nancy Badore is executive director of Ford Development Center, 300 Renaissance Center, Box 43350, Detroit MI 48243.*

Although people think they're providing complexity in a case, they're still simplifying it into an underlying storyline that isn't always there in real life. And very often, things are made "safe." In a real situation, you may know that two people don't get along. You're aware that the people and the system make some things difficult. In a case, you can be quite dispassionate about that—if it hasn't been so camouflaged as to go away.

The good thing about a case—in an impoverished world view, I think—is that it's an alternative to straight lecture. To some people, it feels like participative instruction; it feels as if the students get to do something.

But there's still the notion that the students are being led via teaching notes and objectives to a conclusion that fits a framework held in the expert's mind. The framework I would rather see is one in which people's intelligence is presumed to be approximately level and two kinds of experience are being exchanged, with those in the audience having the opportunity to change the person representing the specialty that he or she teaches.

The clients we serve are the top executives in the company, the "generals and colonels." We used to use what we called cases. For example, in one big program, we took the decision-making documents that the principals in a situation had used and said, "Look, this is as much data as they had; what would you have done?"

We don't do that anymore. In the end, people gave cases low marks. That was true even when the case was presented by a professor who's beloved and can teach a case better than anybody I've ever seen; people just didn't want a case. The fact of the matter is that we have more than a dozen learning vehicles; our customers gave cases the lowest marks.

***Badore's recommendations***

**1.** Ask, "Do grown-ups like this?" Students sometimes are disempowered when they're in your classes. Given a choice, would people prefer to learn this way?

Many academics and consultants alike come in with cases devised for people regarded as "kids." That mindset is the problem.

Suppose Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, Helmut Kohl, and Mikhail Gorbachev are meeting at a summit in three or four weeks, and want to be advised about a particular aspect of your specialty. If you do well—present compelling and persuasive information clearly—what you choose to do may, in fact, change the world.

What would you do with your two hours? I don't think anyone would say, "Well, I'd run 'em through the Corning case."

What's different about the way you would approach your two hours with people whose intellect is beyond question? What do you do in a briefing in which everything depends on what you select of all the things that could be taught, and on how effectively you convey it? What I seek from people who are going to teach here is the kind of respect that they would bring to a briefing of the president. It has nothing to do with office, and everything to do with respect.

**2.** People prefer to analyze and debate work that they're presently encountering or will encounter in the future. Adults get much more out of hearing a real work analysis or lecture than they do out of having someone say to a group of 48 year-olds, "Now, did you understand what Cannon did in the case?" It's not an economical use of their time.

**3.** Respect the expertise of explorers. Some people in our company are the equivalent of Marco Polo—original, world-changing explorers. He went to China; our people went across the Pacific and tried to figure out how to do business with Japan. Granted, they were funded by someone. But they landed not knowing what they'd be met with, encountered the difficulties, figured out what to do, and came home again.

The person who specializes in studying explorers can tell one of them, "You know, all the other explorers I've met and talked to said these things. Does that jibe with your experience and thinking?" But, what any one explorer has is a pure and certain knowledge.

There's something else going on: explorers invent a field. It's each person's experience with the data being brought back that allows researchers to begin to draw conclusions.

We have a course in becoming more effective in our Japanese business alliances. A whole program team comes to take the course together. The team members have been asked to think about what we have achieved and with whom in terms of our Japanese partners. What do we have to accomplish and what are the larger consequences?

Participants learn in that context. They may debate. They almost certainly will be briefed by one of the top three or four people in the company about the overall joint alliance strategy. We sometimes bring in outside experts on the way our Japanese counterparts view the world. International joint ventures are a new way of doing business in the world, so very little has been written about them. Cases just don't come up.

4. I don't mean to say that I reject the case method out of hand. Our strategic decision-making course is run as a simulation and tries to look at some of the critical issues in running an auto business or a piece of the business.

We use what we call a case slip—a page-and-a-half-long, quintessential, mind-blowing dilemma pulled together from inside Ford and phrased with absolute economy. People recognize the dilemma. They say, "That's it. That's absolutely what I'm talking about." Then, debate goes on for two hours.

In a sense, a case slip is a short, extremely well-focused case that superbly exemplifies a dilemma. People walk away with an enlarged understanding of something they're presently responsible for fixing—along with new information and new ways of perceiving. All those learning objectives are there. Adults, I think, would rather have the support of being able to apply their learning to a situation that is real and meaningful.

*This month's "Four by Four" was compiled and edited by Diane Kirrane. Send ideas for future topics to Four by Four,* Training & Development Journal, *1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.*