Case Writing 101

By David Stringer

The pro teaches the novice how to write a realistic training scenario, and we get to listen in.

"He's the best."

I set my skepticism aside for practical reasons: That was my new boss speaking, and he wanted me to talk with Bill Marsh ("the best") to learn to do what he was the best at doing.

My new job was as case writer for Sherbrooke Associates, a management consulting firm based in Boston. Recently retired from a career in education, I was confident of my writing abilities (having taught writing for years), but case writing was new to me.

When Bill came into the conference room, I wasn't prepared for his rumpled appearance. His plaid shirt was tucked haphazardly into nondesigner jeans, his red hair looked wind-blown, and his face bore a raggedy beard. But his eyes were sharp, taking me in at a careful glance before he sprawled into a chair across from me at the table and asked, "What do you want to know?"

"Bob says you're the best." I felt like The Kid calling out the old gunfighter.

"Yes, I suppose I am," he admitted, "though there is another guy who is damn good." We both smiled, as did several people listening from the door. "Let's get to work." He spoke in a serious voice with a strong hint of Boston.

"The first thing to remember is that we create customized cases. We don't do generic 'armchair cases' that apply anywhere and nowhere. Instead, we conduct our training sessions using thinly disguised fictions so that participants get the feel of what things are like where they work. General Mills becomes American Mills, but we make it as much like General Mills as we can. That means you have to get the feeling of the busi-

Illustration by David Johnson

ness. Along with the structure and methodology, you need to pick up the ambiance—the language people use, whether they're laid back or intense, how competitive the environment is, how people talk to each other. Is competition for promotion a big deal? Do people feel relaxed with each other? What's it like in the parking lot or in the cafeteria? What do you see when you look out the boss's window? What's it smell like in the building?"

"Other than keeping my eyes and ears open, how do I find out that stuff?"

"At one place I worked, people used the phrase *buttoned up*, not *buttoned down*. I asked a few people what they meant by the phrase and used it in the case. When they read the case for the training session, the detail gave it credibility. They felt we had a sense of what their company is like and that the issues under discussion were real issues in their workplace."

"So, how do I. . . ?"

"You pick up any paperwork you can. Get a copy of the annual report to see how the company talks about itself. Look up the company on the Internet. Get an analyst report from a brokerage firm. Chris upstairs can help you. Better yet, pick up any in-house newsletters you can get your hands on so you can learn the texture and language lower in the company. Get an organizational chart. Get as much material in advance as you can."

"And then?"

Square 1

"I'd better start at the beginning," said Bill. "We use four main kinds of cases: Gateway, Challenge, Performance Management, and Role Play.

"The **Gateway** cases introduce the course. Frequently, the case involves managers who are technically competent but need work on people-management and leadership skills. For the case, you describe a fictitious company that parallels the real one, with a central character who has problems and challenges, such as low-performing employees. Those problems and challenges will show up in units of the training program."

"How do I find out what issues participants are going to be working on?"

"We work with the client to identify which leadership skills and organizational priorities need help. Everything will be on the placemat."

"Placemat?"

"A one-page chart listing 20 to 40 leadership practices, or whatever, that are important to the client. Whoever you're writing for will identify the ones the case should emphasize."

"OK."

"Gateway cases are long, maybe 12 pages. From them flow the models of leadership to be taught. We like tangible examples, but they're sometimes hard to get and make the case too long. Balance specific concerns with general ones. The purpose of a Gateway case is to tee up the project and introduce the subtopics. In my experience, the shorter the better. Use authenticating details, but leave out enough so that people can project their own experience into what you suggest."

"Who's the leading character?"

"Usually someone at the management level we're working with. These days, we're using slimmed-down Gateways that describe the company without a leading character. Get one to use as a model."

"OK."

"**Challenge** cases are hard to write. Usually, several teams are involved in the teaching session. Each team of five to six people gets a copy of the same case. Each team meets and then reports its solution to the large group. It's competitive.

"The trick is to come up with a situation that puts people on the fence. Give them a dilemma to face; they must choose. It might be an HR issue—for example, a really nice guy, but he's doing unsatisfactory work. Or it might be an ethical dilemma—those are the most fun to write—or a problem of quality versus sales."

"How long are Challenge cases?"

"Typically, they're three to four pages. You write a narrative with a main character and questions for the groups to discuss. You know, should they fire the guy or just warn him?"

"Or promote him?" I joked.

"Unlikely."

Bill doesn't see the humor, I thought, *and probably has never taught high school.*

Bill went on: "Another dilemma to pose might be whether to compromise on the quality of airplane safety inspections in order to heed instructions from your boss to help the company increase its on-time rating. We did one like that, with an option to pass the buck for the safety inspections and responsibility for delay onto someone else. I had fun writing that one."

My mind flooded with possible dilemmas to pose.

"Again," said Bill, "the key is to force a choice. That's what makes the teaching work. People in management have to make decisions. They can't sit around contemplating what a nicely balanced dilemma that is. And if you write one with an obvious right answer, then there's nothing to energize the discussion because everyone will come up with the right answer. Get some of our models."

I was still contemplating dilemmas.

Interrupting my musing, Bill said, "Next, we do a lot of **Performance Management** cases, in which we teach people to manage others' performance. People in management positions often have no training in that, no models. That's where the case comes in."

"I wrote one like that," I said. "It was about teaching new HR people how to fire somebody who had been in a lot of trouble—late, in fights, making threats, sleeping on the job."

Bill stared. "That's not what these cases are like. You might want to create a scenario in which the person being evaluated is just slightly below adequate but has some real plusses. What's the right thing to do? The manager has to decide. Or you might want to create a scenario in which the person is outstanding at what he does, but how he does it raises doubts or his style is abrasive. Maybe, and these kinds of scenarios are tough to write, what he does is unethical but not illegal. If the situation involves ethics, be sure to get a copy of the company's formal code of ethics."

"In advance?"

"Yes, if you can. These Performance Management cases are materials-intense. Ideally, there's a system in place at the company. Push to get real forms from real files so you can see how they're actually filled out. Then, write the case using blank or partially completed forms, or filled in forms with no recommendation."

"Right. I saw a lot of those forms in researching my how-to-fire-the-guy case."

"Typically, a company has a generic pattern: goals, interim review, final evaluation. But there are variations. The timing varies from company to company; sometimes, there's an interview after the final evaluation, and so forth. Find out how the company does that sort of thing."

"That sounds simple enough."

"It's not. Either there's no clear system or there are eight of them. Get the written material in advance, and study it. When you arrive at the company, interview the HR person first and have him or her walk you through the system. Then, interview the bosses and ask, 'What's the most challenging aspect of performance evaluations?' and 'What are some examples of when it's hard to evaluate employees?' Then, interview the people being evaluated in your case. Find out their issues and difficulties. In all of the interviews, you want to ask what it's like at the company when someone falls just short of satisfactory. Press for specific examples. Ask what kinds of excuses people give when they screw up and which are legit. Look for nuances, because that's what makes a case work."

"Right."

"Create separate files for managers and staff, getting each person's spin on the same situation. Ask for typical examples rather than the bizarre. Press people to be specific. Eventually, someone will describe exactly what you're looking for."

"I hope so."

"The structure of a **Role Play** will vary. Again, get models and a placemat so you can learn what will be covered in the training. Usually, there's a setup in which you create a character with a choice. Sometimes, you'll write three role plays, each with two people. One character will have the same organizational position as the participants; the other will be someone they typically deal with. Next, you create some conflicting agendas—some knowledge the two characters have in common but also something one of them holds back."

"Like?"

"Like, a marketing director wants to deliver some quick results on a favorite product, but someone in consumer research has bad news about product testing. Or someone is proud of his creative approaches to his job, not knowing he's going to be chewed out for not taking care of the day-to-day details."

Getting there

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"Right, but nothing too off the wall. Nobody comes in with a gun in his briefcase. Sometimes, we turn up the pressure with a format we call 'Bull in the Ring' or 'Coaching on the Fly.' That's when the main character has exactly 12 minutes to meet with five or six staff or peers. Make up some reason he has only 12 minutes—leaving for vacation or something. Then, write the boss's take on the five or six characters, her view of them, their strengths and weaknesses, or whatever."

"I get it. You write the boss's points of view of the five or six characters and add some conflicting agendas, some surprises."

"That's it. Set up conversations that are realistic for the company and job positions and that emphasize the management skills in the program."

"From the placemat."

"Right. And the debriefing is important. That's where a lot of the teaching takes place."

"How is debriefing done?"

"Usually, we videotape the role plays, play them back, and discuss how the people did handling the situations and decisions they had to make on the fly. The whole thing has value only when the situations are close to what people really experience."

"Should I get the same kind of materials for the role plays that I get for the other cases?"

"Yes, but you'll also need some personal information. What were the typical career paths that led people into their jobs? How old are they? Find out the timelines involved in the projects you're creating. If you're dealing with marketing, for instance, how long should you allow for various kinds of market testing? The questions can vary from company to company. If numbers are important to the company, ask what a good sales figure is. And a bad one."

"How do I find out?"

"You'll probably have a contact at the company you can ask for plausible figures to use. A crazy number can distract participants."

"And undermine the company's credibility."

"Undermine *your* credibility."

"So, I pick up a lot of the information from documents I can get hold of. I do interviews. And follow-up calls?"

"Right, and sometimes you go back for follow-up interviews."

"Any tips?"

"Obvious stuff. Introduce yourself and your firm. The people you interview usually don't have a clue why you're there or why they were selected. You need to fill them in and put them at ease. Say you're there to develop a case on influence management, or performance evaluation, or leadership practices, whatever it is. Tell them that your firm builds customized training programs using case studies and that it's your job to make the cases realistic enough to be useful. Make clear that the case will be fictional: Characters won't be real people, and the name of their company and products will be changed slightly."

"Will people be nervous about revealing information about their jobs, bosses, staff, problems at work, and things like that? Are they going to ask to see what we come up with?"

"If they ask—and they usually don't—tell them you'll check back with them for inaccuracies if you have time. It's best just to ask if you can call them back for more information. Be sure to exchange business cards. Then, take about two minutes to get personal information—background, college education, tenure with the company, career path, and so forth. Next, focus on what it's like there for them in their jobs."

"How do you do that?"

"Just ask, but try to get specific examples you can use to create a realistic situation. For the Challenge or Gateway cases, you might ask what are the top three challenges in the company or person's department. That'll help you get the feel of the place. Then, narrow down to specific examples of how those challenges present themselves. You might ask what's considered a serious incident or problem."

"You just ask that?"

"I ask a lot of *how* questions. Such as, 'How do you typically find out about a problem?' I ask for success stories in terms of the placemat qualities. 'How do those qualities show up in your workday?' And I ask how it plays out in the company when people aren't good at their jobs in a certain way identified on the placemat. Or pose a hypothesis: 'If only person X were more like person Y.' Then ask how X and Y do their jobs. Push for specific incidents and examples."

"Do people usually come up with good examples?"

"Frequently not. But then you'll find one person who's a gold mine. Even if you don't find the nugget of a case, be alert for details or company language."

"How do you conclude the interviews?"

"Thank them for their time, and say how helpful they've been. Ask if you can follow up on the phone."

"That's great, very helpful, Bill. Can I call you back if I think of any follow-up questions or want to check if my notes are accurate?"

"Sure thing, Dave, or why don't I just tell you now?"

"Fire away."

What's in a name?

"Just a few things." Bill leaned back in his chair. "You need a hook, a decision that has to be made. The hook is the tip of the iceberg, the latest in a long line of problems. Start with a close-up of the boss confronting that specific decision and how she feels about it—perhaps what she's thinking: 'What am I going to do about Ted Jones? This is the fourth complaint about him I've heard this week.' Then, back off to describe the context, the business, and maybe the options, and then move back to a close-up of the decision that needs to be made."

"Great. I've seen that pattern in the samples I read. What about names? Can I use the names of my friends or people from my former job?"

"It's best to use made-up names. We have some stock names for the character types we plug into cases for different companies. Daryl is the depressed guy. Chris is the young hotshot who doesn't take care of details. Some of the names are androgynous."

"How about Pat on *Saturday Night Live?*"

"You need a hook, a decision that has to be made. The hook is the tip of the iceberg, the latest in a long line of problems."

Not missing a beat, Bill continues, "Sometimes, we use a pun to suggest attributes, such as Ted Meeks. Or you can use initials to link the name to a role, such as marketing manager Mike Martin."

"Any other tips?"

"There's a technique I've developed that I call 'artfully vague.' That involves using the passive voice or negative language as a way to avoid making a factual mistake that could be distracting."

"For example?"

"Instead of saying 'He was 10 minutes late for the meeting,' say 'He was late again.' In some companies, 10 minutes doesn't count as being late; in others, being one minute late is a problem. You don't want the discussion to bog down on how late is late. Or you might say, 'Her sales figures for the period were far from acceptable,' not telling the real numbers. If you have enough credible details sprinkled throughout a case, especially early on, people project their own numbers."

"How do you know when to use the details and when to be artfully vague?"

"That's the artful part."

Three months later, Sherbrooke called: "We have an emergency—a program in India in three weeks. Can you write a case for us?"

"India? Great, sure!"

"Good. Actually, corporate headquarters is in London. It's a big chemical company."

"London? Sure, I just got my passport."

"First, we'd like you to go to Cleveland for a day or two."

I read through my notes and prepared a list of interview questions and materials. As it turned out, though, there wasn't time to get anything in advance. And my contact person was too busy to see me on such short notice. But with some intense work, a helpful person in Cleveland, and a lot of rewriting, the client loved the case. Sherbrooke phoned to say how well it went.

In other words, all of the useful stuff I learned from Bill Marsh is far from a recipe, which I'm sure he knew all along. Each client is unique; each case is customized. So, in addition to everything I learned from my morning with "the best," I rely on improvisation. As Bill advised me, "Keep in mind what will work and what will involve clients in the skills that need improving." ❑

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