

Case Study Methodology

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The case study methodology is essentially an exercise in critical thinking. Critical thinking, in turn, has two central tasks. The first task is identifying and challenging assumptions. The second is exploring and imagining alternatives.

Identifying and challenging assumptions. When individuals probe their habitual ways of thinking and acting for underlying assumptions they begin the process of critical thinking. Looking for taken-for-granted values, common-sense ideas and stereo-typical notions about human nature and social organization that underlie actions is the business at hand.

An example of this is the case of the citizen who asks what reasons politicians would give for categorizing certain nations or groups as wholly good and others as wholly evil.

The outcome of identifying and challenging assumptions is the recognition of how important it is to understand the context within which assumptions, and the actions which spring from these are formed. This is **contextual awareness**.

Contextual thinkers view their dearly held beliefs and values as, to some extent, social constructs. They understand that value systems and behavioral codes are socially transmitted as well as personally generated and sharpened by personal experiences. An example of a contextually-aware thinker is the citizen who realizes that what a government defines as "normal" unemployment or inflation reflects a particular political philosophy and a set of party manifesto priorities.

A word about perceptions. Adelbert Ames Jr.¹ uncovered a first and most important fact in his perception studies: **we do not get our perceptions from the "things" around us. Our perceptions come from us.** "Reality" is a perception.

What we perceive is largely a function of our previous experiences, our assumptions, and our purposes (needs). We tend to perceive what we want and need to perceive, and what our past experience has led us to assume will "work" for us.

We are unlikely to alter our perceptions until and unless we are frustrated in our attempts to do something based on them.

Since our perceptions come from us and our past experience, it is obvious that each individual will perceive what is "out there" in a unique way. We have no common world, and communication is possible only to the extent that two perceivers have similar purposes, assumptions, and experience.

Perception is, to a much greater extent than previously imagined, a function of the linguistic categories available to the perceiver. It is only a slight exaggeration to say we "see" with our language.

The meaning of a perception is how it causes us to **act**. If it is raining, some people head for shelter, others enjoy walking in it.

Josh Billings² said it almost a century ago: "The trouble ain't that people are ignorant; it's that they 'know' so much that ain't so."

Exploring and imagining alternatives. The second task is to realize that alternatives exist to our current ways of thinking and living. This is the capacity to "generate mentally a structure of possibilities extending beyond the empirically known world of the here and now."³

Realizing that alternatives exist to our present ways of thinking, and that people who live these alternatives regard them as normal and self-evident, is both liberating and threatening.

An example of this realization is the college-educated woman who carved out a successful career in a male-dominated work world but finds that single life and professional esteem still leave an emotional vacuum in her life. Talking to friends in similar positions, she finds that some of them feel the same gnawing discontent; to them, too, the family lifestyle they had previously unthinkingly rejected now appears appealing.

A common misconception about critical thinking is that it precludes commitment to any ideas, actions, or purposes. If we are continually questioning everything (so the argument goes), we become ensnared by the comforts of relativism; since everything can be viewed as culturally specific and bound by context, we need never commit ourselves to an idea, person, institution, or cause. This is a serious misunderstanding of critical thinking. In fact, the opposite is true. We can still hold passionately to certain beliefs, actions, and causes. However, our commitment is not slavish or uninformed, the result of successful socialization. Instead, it is arrived at after **skeptical scrutiny** and after being repeatedly tested against reality as we understand it.⁴

Preparing the case:

There is no single correct solution to a case and there is no single correct way to prepare one. These guidelines may help you prepare.

First Question: What sort of organization is this? Do I have a feel for the overall situation here? You can get this answered by a quick-skim reading of the case.

Second Question: After a careful second reading of the case, you need to identify key facts, the nature of the problem facing management (you), and the decision to make. What do I do now (from the viewpoint of the person in the major role)? You are ready to begin the analysis. These steps may help:

- Who are the characters? (Relationships?)
- What is the focus of the case?
- Is there a problem?
- Define the problem

Third Question: What assumptions underlie the case? What are my own assumptions? What are my own expectations about the present? The future? How do I relate assumptions to the cast of characters?

Fourth Question: What are possible solutions? Only after you've defined the problem should you set about listing alternative solutions.

- List alternate solutions
- List the criteria the solution must meet to be viable
- Evaluate solutions in light of criteria

Fifth Question: Am I ready to make a decision and act on it? What is the decision?

- Implement chosen solution
- Evaluate solution

Traps to avoid:

- I don't have enough information
- They made mistakes they shouldn't have/I wouldn't have.

Class discussions:

Learning comes through discussion and controversy. In the case method of instruction, the participants must assume responsibility not only for their own learning, but also for that of others in the class. Thus, it is important that you be well-prepared, willing to commit yourself to a well-reasoned set of analyses and recommendations, capable of contributive participation, and receptive to constructive criticism. If you can do this, you will likely experience a sense of excitement, stimulation and even exasperation that comes with being a manager.

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- ¹ From: Postman, Neil and Weingartner, Charles. Teaching as a Subversive Activity, New York: Delacorte Press, 1969. (p 88)
 - ² Ibid. (p 144)
 - ³ Broughton, J.. "Beyond Formal Operations: Theoretical Thought in Adolescence." Teachers College Record, 1977, 79(1), p.9.
 - ⁴ See Also: Brookfield, Stephen D. Developing Critical Thinkers, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1987.