

Curriculum and Case Notes

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MAKING THE CASE FOR CASES: THE USE OF "HOME GROWN" TEACHING CASES TO PROVIDE CREDIBILITY IN CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, the New York City Department of Personnel (DOP) launched the Leadership Institute, a professional development program for outstanding upper level managers working in New York City government. The purpose of this program was to prepare them to play significant roles in citywide change initiatives. City government was facing what has become a classic set of problems and opportunities: major budget shortfalls resulting in significant budget cuts, with more to come, and a strong interest among administrations then leading the City in "reinventing" and "reengineering" government, both to make it more responsive and to achieve that holy grail of public management, doing more with less. The City sought to identify and select its true rising-star managers and prepare them to lead the implementation of various change initiatives that would occur within City agencies and across City government. As the Deputy City Personnel Director for Personnel Development, and the first Director of the Leadership Institute, we conceived, developed, and launched the Leadership Institute. It became a very successful program, but also presented us with a host of challenges. As is often the situation, these challenges ended up setting the stage for innovation. For us, that was a unique approach to developing and using teaching cases.

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The Challenge and the Key: Credibility

The challenges we faced as we developed the Leadership Institute from an idea into a full-fledged program were essentially problems of credibility:

- How could the Department of Personnel's training bureau—traditionally relegated to more peripheral activities with lower level staff—overcome being locked out of executive education programs and major management initiatives and become a real partner in change initiatives being led by City Hall and agency managers?
- How could agencies be convinced to enroll real rising-star managers, and to continue sending them over time?
- How could these managers, the right audience for this professional program, but a seasoned group skeptical of change initiatives, be convinced that change was possible and worth pursuing—in general, in government, or in New York City government?
- Even if these managers were persuaded that change initiatives could be successful, how could they be convinced that lessons of change management and leadership can be learned in a seminar and successfully applied back in their agencies?
- Who could credibly stand up in front of these managers and teach them?

An Insight and a Decision: Managers Need to Hear from Other Managers

As we designed the Leadership Institute, we faced a problem common to professional development programs. While participants usually found success stories from other places and sectors interesting, they often did not consider them sufficiently relevant to be useful. This was certainly true of New York City managers. Many felt that approaches that worked in the private sector could not work in the public sector, given significant differences in resources, regulation, and culture. They also felt that many strategies employed by other—almost invariably smaller—cities were extremely difficult to replicate in New York, given its scale and complexity.

While managers were not averse to looking outside the City for ideas and strategies, it was clear that any useful program had to include success stories from New York City government itself and feature managers who faced the same sets of challenges as the participants did. Using New York City change stories was not enough. It would be important for the managers themselves to be present, so that program participants could ask them questions, push them on details, and satisfy their own skepticism. We realized that this need clearly called for a high degree of customization, and decided it would be important to bring in successful managers to talk about change initiatives they had led.

Another benefit of this approach was that it would recognize and honor the richness of skill and experience in government in general, and New York City government in particular. Too often in executive education programs for government managers, there is a privileging of private-sector experience as the best source of insight, innovation, and solutions. Rarely do any professional development programs mine local experience in any robust way for their curricula. New York City government had numerous examples of innovative, tenacious responses to large-scale, complex problems. It was time to look at New York City government as a great laboratory for ideas and solutions that were being developed and tested. The

Leadership Institute would begin to collect these ideas and strategies, and disseminate them so they could be leveraged.

The integral use of New York City government success stories and the managers who led them would also reinforce the notion of the program participants as “rising stars.” We decided that selection to the Leadership Institute would involve a competitive application process that included an endorsement from the applying manager’s commissioner. Key criteria for selection were a demonstrated ability in managing change initiatives and recognized potential for leadership roles in larger-scale change programs. By introducing program participants to the successful managers who would be brought in to share their experiences, the Institute would communicate its recognition of the skill and potential of the participants—they are worth investing in—and reinforce that recognition among the participants themselves—they would see themselves as part of a unique peer group of change leaders.

This approach would generate aspirations, too. Rising-star managers would look to become star managers. The trajectory to becoming a manager working successfully on large-scale change initiatives would not be abstract. It would be modeled by the star managers, and would reflect their diverse approaches, career paths, and personalities. Program participants might also think about the possibility of sharing their own success stories some day.

We also understood that, particularly as the Institute got under way, a consistent focus on successful change initiatives, as shared by credible City managers, would promote the Leadership Institute as an integral part of the operational challenges and change management initiatives being undertaken citywide and within agencies. One of our primary goals was for the Institute to avoid the typical characterization that often plagues professional development programs—a nice perquisite for a hard-working manager that mostly provided personal benefits—and to be genuinely seen as a place where managers could both develop their individual skills and obtain strategies, ideas, and solutions that could be brought to challenges in agencies across the City.

A Solution: Carefully Selected, Customized Teaching Cases

While we saw the benefits of bringing in star City managers to talk about successful change initiatives they had led, we also recognized the problems this approach presented. It too often led to envy, not action. Though the manager inspired program participants, they usually concluded that the answer to solving a problem or bringing about a change was to be lucky enough to be that manager, or to work for him or her. The session with a manager was on some level satisfying, but participants were no closer to solving their own problems or successfully managing change initiatives back in their own agencies. Furthermore, if the belief that New York City government was a laboratory of ideas and strategies on change was to be held with some seriousness, then it was important to find a way to share these success stories with significant levels of reflection, complexity, and nuance. We were certain that off-the-cuff comments, or some thoughts jotted down the night before would not achieve our learning goals for the program.

As we searched for a solution to these problems, we came up with the idea of using teaching cases led by the protagonist. One of the benefits of the case format was that it framed analysis around a problem or set of circumstances. Such a structure would help keep attention on the problem and reduce the tendency to focus on

personality. By using the case format, a manager could get program participants to look at the situation itself, and a range of options for managing it, and avoid getting drawn into a premature conversation about the manager's response. Participants quite legitimately want to ask the manager, "How did you handle that situation?" The case format would make it easier for the manager to respond, "Let's talk about what I did at the end of the discussion. Obviously, there's not just one way to handle this situation."

Having managers teach their own cases would be very important for the program participants, too. It would be a unique opportunity to get time with the leader of a project or initiative. And, once again, the importance of credibility was ever present. Program participants would want to hear from the managers themselves about these initiatives. By taking an unorthodox approach to case teaching, and having the principals themselves teach the cases, we could combine the credibility of the manager with a more structured focus on the presenting problem.

The case format would also address our concern about stories shared in an off-the-cuff manner, as it would require a great deal of reflection, interviewing, discussion, and ultimately, an organized, written product. It is precisely the type of preparation that cases require that would provide the necessary forethought. It would call upon the senior manager to reconstruct key elements and details from the presenting situation, identify important decision points, and distill lessons from stories.

As we continued to think through the idea of using teaching cases developed with and led by star City managers, another credibility issue asserted itself. The cases, and the managers leading discussion of them, would only achieve the hoped-for outcomes if they were, indeed, seen by the program participants as credible success stories and credible star managers. We would have to very carefully select which stories to turn into cases, and by extension, which managers to invite in as Institute faculty. Our invitations would send a clear message regarding which senior managers we thought participants should meet and what types of change programs and attendant roles participants could expect to find themselves in as they progressed in their careers. We anticipated that, over time, it might become possible to add cases that involved middle managers, or that focused on instructive experiences of failure; we realized, however, that we could only take those new directions once the initial group of cases focusing on successes led by senior managers had been launched and well established.

Making It Happen: Select, Secure, Support, and Supervise

Our first step was to identify and secure the commitment of the right managers, ensuring that the Institute ended up with the best possible group of cases and teachers. We created the list of managers we approached to serve as the inaugural group of case presenters in two ways. First, we identified senior City managers who were considered change champions. The solid, impressive reputations of these managers recommended them, and it was certain that they would have several change experiences they could present. Second, we identified credible stories, which we defined as a change initiatives widely seen as successful by managers around the City, i.e., the "word on the street" about them was good. Once we established the list, securing commitments proved relatively straightforward in large part because the requests were made of senior managers by a senior manager.

Like all good managers, the people we approached were concerned about the time commitment. We retained the services of several case writers, which reassured the

managers that the process would not be too onerous for them.¹ We also committed to providing a one-day master class to all managers in order to prepare them to lead case discussion. While the managers we approached quickly raised these practical concerns, it was also clear that the request had some personal appeal: it was flattering to be asked to share an experience, and the values of the Institute were coincident with the senior managers' own commitment to professional development and effective management.

At the same time, we knew it was important to be up front and clear about what our expectations were: attendance at an all-day master class, making time to be interviewed by a case writer and to review and comment on drafts, and presenting the case at least once during the program. Ultimately, six senior managers agreed to serve as the inaugural group of case presenters.

A case expert from a major university led the master class, which served as the launch event for the initiative. The class began with a seminar on case teaching that included modeling a case and walking through the basics of case development. The second part of the class involved consultations between the manager, the case expert, and the two of us. During these consultations, the managers related the basics of their stories, so the case expert could suggest one or two paths for development. We explored such topics as, at what point should the case stop, or what questions should be put to the group. It was the beginning of determining the main points to the case and the major hooks for class exploration and conversation. We made a specific point of explaining how we hoped the case would illustrate a curriculum topic. At the end of the day, we introduced the case writers and matched them with managers, and the pairs set initial appointments for case development.

Our supervision of the process was an important part of case development. We reviewed drafts to make sure that the cases represented the points of emphasis identified in the master class, and that the case would come across as relevant and engaging to the participating managers. Sometimes the case writer would get interested in a tangential point, or take an approach that was too academic. At the same time, we realized it was important to be open to the possibility that the case might emerge slightly different than originally planned, once the manager had fully reflected on the story. So, there was a need to manage various tensions that the development process surfaced, to be mindful of the change management focus of the program, and to remain flexible.

While all the cases examined the complex issues and strategies associated with major change efforts in entrenched bureaucracies, each brought specific issues to the fore. For example:

- "An Award Winning Agency Reshapes Its Mission: Rose Washington & DJJ" focused on strategies for securing buy-in from your executive team for a new vision.
- "The New Police Paradigm: Introduction of Community Policing" involved stakeholder analysis, enlisting other agency support, and addressing staff resistance.
- "Taming the Elections Tempest: David Moskovitz and the NYC Elections Project" highlighted the importance of insuring accuracy of the problem assessment, managing expectations of senior managers, mobilizing political will, and technology as a catalyst for major change.

¹ Three case writers were selected from a pool of management consultants and graduate students in public administration.

While the managers did have some anxiety about their ability to be case leaders, it quickly became clear to us that the qualities that made them good leaders would serve them well in case discussions. As a group, these managers were reflective, tolerated ambiguity but also could get to the heart of the matter, knew how to draw others in, how to bring out opposing viewpoints to improve deliberation, and how to push people to move to a decision.

Moments of Truth: Teaching the Cases the First Time and Over Time

The first time that the cases were taught in the inaugural class, after several months of preparation, they were well received but certainly not perfect. Like any first-time teachers, the senior managers were a little stiff as presenters, as this was a new format for them. Still, their credibility was well established and shone through from the very beginning, balancing out their nascent skills as case teachers. It was clear that the participants felt these managerial challenges equaled or surpassed challenges they faced in their jobs, and that they could learn something from these senior managers.

As the Leadership Institute continued and more classes of managers went through the program, the ongoing use of cases taught by senior managers grew in value. Whereas the “sharing of war stories” usually becomes stale over time—the story told by the senior manager becomes a very canned presentation—the customized case approach developed by the Leadership Institute led to real richness through its repetition. The senior managers grew in confidence, skill, and risk taking each time they returned to the Institute to lead the case discussion. They became more comfortable with silences during discussion. They became more skillful at turning questions back to the participants, and pushing them to reach into their own experiences to suggest ideas and strategies.

One of the most exciting things we witnessed over time was the risk taking and innovation many of the senior managers employed in successive teachings of their cases. This often took the form of role plays, conceived in the moment or prepared in advance. The senior managers knew that much of change involved negotiation and getting buy-in from key people. They would set up two participants in a true-to-life role-play of a classic interaction. Or, they would perfectly take on the role of the difficult employee, key union official, or hard-to-reach commissioner, and have a series of participants role play a particular conversation with them. Over time, the senior managers also developed real clarity about the core lessons of their cases and became more relaxed about letting the case discussion go in many different directions, confident that each of these paths would allow for the discussion they wanted to have.

Outcomes of the Case Initiative

The customized case initiative of the Leadership Institute brought about both immediate and lasting outcomes for the program participants, the case presenters, and for the Institute itself.

For the participants, the cases immediately provided uniquely relevant lessons. For example, every case touched on the importance of stakeholder management in bringing about a successful change initiative, but these cases also yielded a very specific list of the stakeholders one needed to manage in New York City government, something ready-made cases could only do in a limited or even faulty way. Furthermore, the stakeholder management discussion was informed, enlivened, and sometimes role-played by a seasoned manager who could deliver an important level of authenticity. From the very first class, the cases generated many of the

hoped-for results: participants saw credible evidence of the possibility of change in New York City government; they felt themselves to be part of a special group of change agents; they became familiar with roles, leadership styles, and possibilities to which they could aspire. The cases also set and fed an expectation for relevance and interactivity that made the managers in the program an energetic group of participants who were demanding and very engaged.

Over the years, managers who have participated in the Leadership Institute have reported to us that the case lessons have stayed with them as they have worked on various change initiatives. The lessons tend to be the standard maxims regarding change, but the managers internalized them in ways that would have been impossible had they simply received the ideas as platitudes in an inspirational speech on change, or overly simple summary of a much richer experience. Participants have reported that, as they lead their own change programs, they keep certain ideas close to mind, such as the transforming power of a clear vision, the constant need to test assumptions, and the inescapable fact that people will only support what they have helped build. All of these insights were obtained at the Leadership Institute and reinforced back on the job.

For the senior managers who served as teachers, there was, in the midst of a hectic work life, the opportunity to reflect on something they were proud of and considered successful and to determine what lessons were worth sharing with others. Coming in and teaching their cases was certainly a way to give back and help other managers, but it was also an opportunity to feed themselves by connecting with people who were committed to change and improving City services. Over time, several of the senior managers went on to become adjunct faculty at various universities and found another use for their cases with different audiences. A number of the senior managers told us that they took away more lessons from the experience contained in their cases when they taught them than they ever had at the time of the case itself.

For the Leadership Institute, the case initiative established its credibility as a serious, effective, and creative program integral to the change work going on around the City. Strong managers continued to apply and participate in the program. Other managers agreed to turn their stories into cases and to teach them, and still other managers started to approach the Institute with an interest in participating as case teachers. Ten years after it was established, the Leadership Institute is still in existence, along with its case initiative. It has survived changes in the mayoralty, restructuring of the agency where it resides, and numerous changes in agency commissioners. In spite of some serious budget shortfalls over the years, the program has survived, as agencies now pay for their participating managers' slots in the program, which is perhaps the best testimony to its success. As anticipated, graduates of the Institute have gone on to lead numerous change initiatives within agencies and citywide.

Lessons Learned

The case initiative of the Leadership Institute yielded as many rich lessons as the cases themselves. If someone were interested in replicating the initiative in some form, we suggest that they consider several philosophical, strategic, and practical points:

- *Believe in the idea.* This point may seem obvious, but it is worth mentioning. Underneath the entire enterprise of home grown, principal-led teaching cases is a belief that there are valuable local experiences and role models, and that they should be central to any professional development program. It is certainly helpful to draw from other sectors and benchmark from similar organizations, but there also needs to be recognition of internal innovation and solutions.

- *Keep the focus on relevance and credibility.* Ironically, it is easy, in the rush to launch a program, schedule speakers, and identify materials, to short change the time devoted to thinking through issues such as: what do the managers participating in the program need to know given their current and anticipated roles; what points-of-view, details, and lessons in a case will be most important to them; which success stories and senior managers will have true credibility with them; how would a case illustrate a curriculum topic. By focusing on credibility and relevance, most other considerations in program design—such as selection criteria for participants, topics for the curriculum, as well as which cases and senior managers to include—will fall into place.
- *Select wisely.* If you have made credibility the coin of the realm, then it is essential to deliver on credibility. It is, therefore, particularly important that the initial group of cases and senior manager presenters be truly seen as credible with their intended audience. These selections will send very clear messages and will lay the groundwork for future selections.
- *Beware of distractions.* Stories of change are always interesting, and it is easy to become fascinated with their various aspects; however, it is important to keep in mind the challenges that program participants are facing, and will go on to face, and to ensure that the cases prepare them for those challenges. As cases are being conceived, developed, and taught, there are countless opportunities to get distracted from that core task. It is worth asking at regular junctures of the process whether the case that is being developed is interesting *and useful*.
- *Support the case development process.* Having customized teaching cases is a wonderful accomplishment. Creating customized teaching cases is a significant amount of work. It is important to obtain some expertise on case development and teaching, as well as some staff very skilled at interviewing and writing. The senior managers need to feel that the process is not too difficult. Devote sufficient time to the development process, including time for revisions. At least one program manager, who is able to ensure credibility and relevance, must devote sufficient time to regular supervision of the process.
- *Look at the cases as evolving works.* Because a lot of work goes into developing a case, there is a temptation to feel “done” once it is developed and taught for the first time. Prior to subsequent presentations, it is worth reviewing the case and checking in with the senior manager/presenter on insights of the case that can receive more emphasis, or possible presentation innovations like short role plays. The modifications need not be labor intensive. Some small change each time the case is taught could be more than sufficient. Such attention is important to leverage the benefits of repeated teaching.

Editor's Note: A selection of the cases described in this article will soon be available on the Electronic Hallway.

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