

Analyzing a Case:

A General Strategy

A case is a story that describes a problematic incident, event, or situation. It typically reports in-depth information about certain aspects of the situation while under-reporting other aspects, and its conclusion is commonly left open-ended. The mission of case analysis is to make sense of the given material and to identify appropriate actions for handling the case situation.

Successful case discussions begin with an analysis of the key issues in the case. The analysis then serves as the basis for defining the most desirable outcomes and considering what options are available. This process usually results in a diversity of opinion as participants view the case situation from their unique perspectives, stressing different values and promoting different outcomes. Such diversity of opinion is the strength of the group case exercise. Participants should value these differences, recognizing them as essential to learning, and make a special effort to encourage new opinions about the case. As a result, the case exercise will become an even more profitable learning experience.

In case analysis, participants also evaluate the different opinions about the case and use their evaluations as the basis for forming a common opinion. By working together in this way to build group consensus on case solutions, participants gain a deeper understanding of how they can constructively deal with real-life leadership issues. Included below are case analysis guidelines that constitute a seven-step method for reaching group consensus. These steps provide participants with a common source of direction for addressing case issues, and also appear in the form of a handy Case Analysis Worksheet at conclusion of this section (see page xvii).

Case Analysis Guidelines

Step 1. *What are the key issues or problems of the case?*

Any case may suggest several interpretations of what the focal concerns are. It is helpful to begin by identifying as many different interpretations as possible. Have each participant state why he or she identified the issues or problems as key.

Step 2. *Prioritize the problems.*

Participants should focus on the key issues of the case. This may involve selecting one of the issues already raised or creating a new statement that identifies the problem. In some cases, there may be several problems at work, in which case participants may wish to simply rank the problems in terms of either potential importance or timing of impact.

CASE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

1. What are the key issues or problems of the case?

2. Prioritize the issues or problems.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

3. Is it necessary to identify the cause of the problem?

4. Brainstorm the options available.

5. Evaluate the options:
- | | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|----------|------------|---------------|
| • _____: | _____ | _____ |
| • _____: | _____ | _____ |
| • _____: | _____ | _____ |

6. Select the optimum solution.

7. Describe how the solution should be implemented. _____

Step 3. *Consider whether it is necessary to determine the "cause" of the problem.*

In some cases, it is important to determine what caused the problem in order to identify the appropriate solution(s). In other cases, the cause of the problem is not as important as what to do about it. Therefore, when working on a case, always ask whether it is necessary to decide what the cause is.

It should be noted that speculating on the motivations of the individuals in a case seldom does more than sidetrack a case study. By trying to determine why a person acted in a certain way, participants can easily fall into unproductive discussions that revolve around guesswork instead of focusing on the situation at hand. Managers and supervisors often must respond to actions (or lack of actions) made by the people with whom they work, and reflecting on the motivations of others is, in this regard, only a diversion.

Step 4. *Brainstorm the options available to the leader.*

There is always one option: Do nothing. However, there are usually several ways to respond to a problem, and helping participants identify those options is an important part of case discussions. Participants should be encouraged to use their best brainstorming skills to determine what the options are.

Step 5. *Evaluate the options.*

Each option will have advantages and disadvantages. In management and human resource issues, there are several criteria that may be useful for evaluating different options, including:

- The power of the option to solve the problem
- The impact of the option on organizational performance and/or morale
- Legal or regulatory liabilities and requirements
- Cost of the option
- The ability of the person(s) involved to carry out the option (in terms of skill, authority, or basic motivation)

Step 6. *Select the optimum solution*

The ideal solution will produce the best outcome at the least cost. In management situations, this may not be possible. Therefore, selecting the best solution may involve balancing competing opportunities and constraints with an optimum solution that produces satisfactory outcomes on as many criteria as possible.

Step 7. *Describe how the solution should be implemented.*

Create a plan or "script" of what the manager or supervisor should do to implement the solution.