

Health Care Management Case Studies and Guidelines¹

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INTRODUCTION

A case study is the presentation of an organizational scenario. The case will usually present a description of the organization as well as the major players in the organization and their interactions regarding a specific situation. The objective in analyzing a case study is to develop and test a proposed “solution” to address the described situation. As praised in the *Case Study Handbook from the Harvard Business School*, “The case method is not only the most relevant and practical way to learn managerial skills, it’s exciting and fun” (Hammond, 2002, p. 1). Hammond states further:

Simply stated, the case method calls for discussion of real-life situations that business executives have faced. Casewriters, as good reporters, have written up these situations to present you with the information available to the executives involved. As you review their cases, you will put yourself in the shoes of the managers, analyze the situation, decide what you would do, and . . . [be] prepared to present and support your conclusions. (Hammond, 2002, p. 1)

Case studies are thus widely used as learning methods in the education of health care managers and administrators. Cases require the student to think, reason, develop critical thinking and analytic skills, identify underlying causes of problems, use creative abilities, make decisions, and, in the case of group work, deal with personality conflicts and change. Generally, health care management utilizes two types of case studies: diagnostic and descriptive. In a diagnostic case study, a major issue or problem will need to be identified and addressed. A descriptive case study usually presents a theme or describes a situation or series of events. There is not necessarily a major problem presented, and thus the objective is more of discussing the theme in terms of management challenges. Regardless of the type, case studies can be daunting at first, and a good strategy for how to tackle the case study is needed.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Based on more than two decades of experience using the case study method in the classroom and in faculty workshops, we recommend that students work in teams and use the following guidelines for case studies.

- Read (or watch) the case carefully several times. The first time you read it, read it quickly, trying to pick up the high-level issues and players. In successive readings, become absorbed in the situation in such a way that you see yourself intimately involved with the personalities, problems, and conflicts.

TIP: Highlight sentences that may be important in identifying the main issue or theme of the case, and strike out those sentences that are “nice to know” but not critical to the issues in the case. This will help you to filter out the “noise” in the case.

- As the case starts to become more familiar to you, begin to ask yourself the following types of questions and jot down your thoughts:
 1. What is *really* going on this case? Generally speaking, what types of managerial issues are there (e.g., human resources, leadership, legal, confidentiality, quality control, conflict management, etc.)?
 2. Can you describe *in one sentence* the major issue/problem? Make a list of all of the problems you can identify. Analyze this list to see if you can determine how these problems relate to each other. Are some problems the *cause* of other problems? If so, highlight the causal problems to see if a pattern develops. For example, a problem that is usually rather easy to identify is a loss of revenue, but you must dig deeper—*why* is there a loss of revenue? What is causing it?
- This will lead you to begin to understand the secondary, or underlying, issues. It is important to note here that you may end up with more than one “major” problem; your challenge is to identify the one that has the greatest potential to alter the situation for the better if addressed successfully.

TIP: Sketch out the relationships between your major and secondary problems in a flowchart-like manner.

Apply reasoning to how and why the problems developed; always answer the question, “WHY?” While we only know what the case tells us, we need to think about underlying motivators while we read. Play “devil’s advocate” to test these causal relationships to help ensure you are on the right track.

- Conduct some initial research on your identified major problem/issue. The research will likely help frame the major problem and reinforce its relationships to your potential secondary problems. For example, if the problem you have identified deals with employee supervision, research what types of things need to be considered when supervising employees (e.g., performance reviews, hiring/firing processes, related potential legal issues, discrimination and/or diversity issues, mentoring, confidentiality, etc.). Be sure to consider any potential diversity issues and the impact they may have. Only by gaining an understanding of the relevant management issues surrounding the major problem can you begin to develop potential solutions.

TIP: Utilize academic and trade journals as the major focus of your research. Websites can only get you so far, and academic/trade journals will provide you with more in-depth and directly relevant information

- **Important note:** If you are working in teams on the case study, we highly recommend you complete all of the above steps *individually*, and then come together as a group to compare notes. This will help to ensure you have done the best job of analyzing the case.
- Now that you have identified the major problem, decide from which management level you want to “solve” the problem. Is the problem best addressed from a departmental perspective (e.g., supervisor, director, manager), a senior executive perspective (e.g., vice presidents), an organizational perspective (e.g., CEO, board of directors), or perhaps from an outside perspective (e.g., consultant)? Note that in order to make this decision, you *must* understand the roles and responsibilities of each of these levels as they relate to the problem and identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
- Identify at least two, but no more than three, potential alternative “solutions” to address the major problem *from the management level you have selected*. This is where you are being asked to “think outside of the box.” Were there possibilities not suggested by the text? How would each of these solutions improve the situation, and to what degree? Identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The best choice may not be affordable; as managers we have to “satisfice,” that is, make the best choice available at that time. Is one more cost-effective than the other(s)? Would one of them take too long to implement before experiencing the needed results? Do you have the expertise and resources to implement the solution? In developing your alternative solutions, keep in mind the strengths and weaknesses of the organization *as they relate to the major problem*. Having a great community reputation, for example, will likely have little bearing on whether you should fire the head of surgery. However, significant financial reserves may be relevant in trying to increase access for patients in outlying areas. Remember, there is no one right or wrong solution, only better or worse solutions. The difference will be in how you analyze and present them.
- Select the best alternative solution to implement. In the step above, you analyzed each potential alternative in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Through this process it should have become evident which alternative has the best chance of successfully addressing the major problem. Your final challenge is to identify *how* and *when* you will know whether your proposed alternative solution worked. To do this, you must identify ways to evaluate your solution. For example, if the desired outcome of your solution is increased revenue, when will this occur, and to what degree? Increased revenue will be one of your evaluation metrics, but you will need to outline specifically what you expect to happen. A sufficient response in this example could be “increase revenue by 5% by end of third quarter.” Note that regardless of which metrics you choose, you need to be able to *measure* them. At this point in the case it may be necessary to “assume” some things. For example, if a desired outcome is increased patient satisfaction, you can assume the organization already measures this and simply state your expected quantitative improvement and time frame (e.g., “improve patient satisfaction by 10 percentage points within six months”). However, be sure to *state any assumptions* you are making (e.g., “We assume the organization already tracks patient satisfaction and it is currently at 30%”).

CASE STUDY WRITE-UP

Prepare a written report of the case using the following format.

Background Statement

What is going on in this case *as it relates to the identified major problem*? What are (only) the key points the reader needs to know in order to understand how you will “solve” the case? Summarize the scenario in your own words—do not simply regurgitate the case. Briefly describe the organization, setting, situation, who is involved, who decides what, and so on.

Major Problems and Secondary Issues

Specifically identify the major and secondary problems. What are the real issues? What are the differences? Can secondary issues become major problems? Present analysis of the causes and effects. Fully explain your reasoning.

Your Role

In a sentence or short paragraph, declare from which role you will address the major problem, whether you are a senior manager, departmental manager, or an outside consultant called in to advise. Regardless of your choice, you *must* justify in writing *why* you chose that role. What are the advantages and disadvantages of your selected role? Be specific.

Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses

Identify the strengths and weaknesses that exist *in relation to the major problem*. Again, your focus here should be in describing what the organization is capable of doing (and not capable of doing) with respect to addressing the major problem. Thus, the identified strengths and weaknesses should include those at the managerial level of the problem. For example, if you have chosen to address the problem from the departmental perspective and the department is understaffed, that is a weakness worthy of mentioning. Be sure to remember to include any strengths/weaknesses that may be related to diversity issues.

Alternatives and Recommended Solutions

Describe the two to three alternative solutions you came up with. What feasible strategies would you recommend? What are the pros and cons? State what should be done—why, how, and by whom. Be specific.

Evaluation

How will you know when you've gotten there? There must be measurable goals put in place with the recommendations. Money is easiest to measure; what else can be measured? What evaluation plan would you put in place to assess whether you are reaching your goals?

TIP: Write this section as if you were trying to “sell” your proposed solution to the organization. Convince the reader that your proposed solution is the best available and that it will work as planned. Make sure the goals you identify are worth the effort required to achieve them!

TEAM STRUCTURE AND PROCESS FOR COMPLETION

We recommend that teams select a team leader and a team recorder, although *all* should take notes. The team should decide how to divide the tasks to be accomplished. In our classes, we expect to see written responses to the aforementioned questions, and the written, typed case studies to be a minimum of five pages long. Teams should indicate who had responsibility for different tasks/sections on the written materials that are handed in.

Team findings should be presented in no more than 10 minutes to the rest of the class. Individual grades are given for each of the student's designated sections and a group grade for the case study as a whole from peers on the presentation, plus teammates are required to grade each other's efforts and teamwork within the group. The average of the three grades becomes each individual's case study grade. Copies of forms utilized for each evaluation (individual sections, group presentation, and teamwork) are provided in this chapter (Figure 18-1, Figure 18-2, and Figure 18-3).

Guidelines for Effective Participation

1. Attend all team sessions. Eighty percent of life is showing up. It's important here too.
2. Prepare before coming to team sessions, and take careful notes. Think about the project and be prepared for each session.
3. Help establish the purpose of the session and the direction to be followed by the group.
4. Have an open mind and be willing to modify your conclusions. Welcome the stimulation of having your ideas challenged.
5. Strike a balance between your speaking time and that of others.
6. Be respectful, considerate, and tactful of the feelings of others—especially when you disagree.
7. Present the substance of your thinking concisely and to the point.
8. Help the team reach some conclusions within the allotted time.
9. Really pull your weight on the team. Assist in accomplishing the work of the team by putting the needs of the group ahead of your own needs.