Thickening Case Discussions Through Enactments

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Abstract

Argues that the developmental edge in leadership development is working towards bridging the "knowing-doing" gap through the use of enactments to thicken the learning from existing cases to surface differences between espoused theories and actual behaviors in order to get feedback from fellow learners and faculty.

Multiple enactments of difficult encounters in a case, like sports drills, build resilience, skills and repertoires for engaging with the increased levels of ambiguity and uncertainty in current business contexts. This practical method builds on an existing vast resource of cases to visceralize learning via enactments of tactics of effective and ineffective influence—in essence addressing the "knowing-doing gap."

Keyword(s): Executive development; Case studies; Leadership styles; Learning methods

Introduction

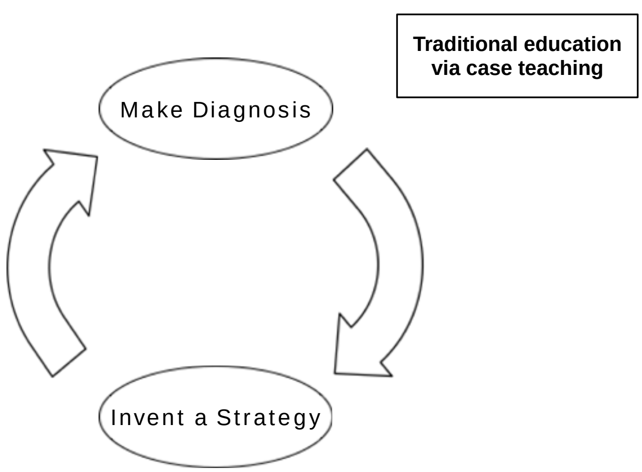
Since the early-1920s, business schools have been using the case-study method for "practice in sizing up situations and deciding upon appropriate actions" (Garvin, 2003). Cases have proved to be a powerful method of bringing complex situations into the classroom via teams assigned to cases to learn from the collaboration. But there are also many authors who have been critical of the case method, as well as other practices of management education and business academia (e.g., Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Mintzberg, 2004).

One of the critiques is too much emphasis on diagnosis and suggesting interventions versus actually producing them. An analogy would be teaching tennis by having students observe a match (analogous to the case description), critique a shot selection and suggesting a better one without actually trying to execute the recommended shot. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) have flagged this as the "knowing-doing" gap between analytical insights about what to do and the inability to enact the recommended behaviour. A powerful example is the large gap between the advice given in performance-appraisal discussions to "create a non-defensive climate" and the challenge of actually doing so.

The enactment cycle

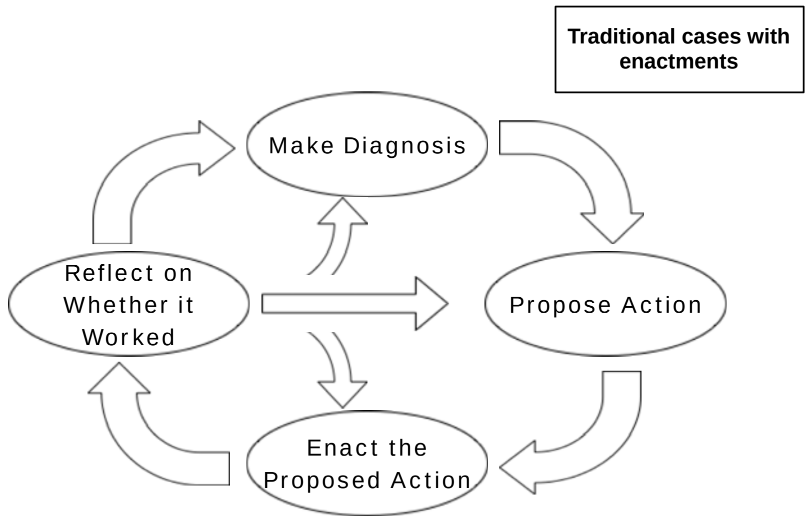
The focus of traditional business cases on two activities—diagnosis and proposals for action—require sharp analytical skills and creativity. A rich case discussion can cycle between these two stages, drawing on the divergence of diagnoses in the class and how they offer different strategies for the protagonists in the case (see Figure 1). This approach produces business graduates with strong analytical abilities who know what to do on an intellectual level, but can they then enact these lessons in social and organizational contexts?

Figure 1



In the following diagram (Figure 2), we suggest that traditional case teaching can richly cycle through diagnosis and proposed action, but short-change enacting the proposed actions and limit deeper reflection.

Figure 2



Only in some areas of management education—such as negotiation and effective speaking—have business educators incorporated active practice, reflection, feedback and repeated practice.

Taking the previous example of performance appraisals, Argyris and Schon's (1974) work has shown, approaches are proposed that are often different from what actually results, that is, "theory in use", and are unaware of the discrepancy. Are learners aware that they are unable to create a non-defensive climate?

In other cases managers may know that they probably fail to create a non-defensive climate, as the reaction of subordinates is often self-justifying in the evaluation meetings. However, the opportunity could be taken to improve the micro-skill of managers.

How seriously we underestimate the felt risks in moving from talk to action is illustrated by a story about psychologist Stanley Milgram, famous for his experiments on authority. Curious about a cocktail-party hunch that New Yorkers were rude, he had given his students the assignment to ask strangers for their seats on crowded subway trains without giving a reason. A high number in the group felt too fearful to even to make the request. To explore that finding, he tried it himself.

> Dismissing his students' fears, Dr. Milgram set out to try it himself. But when he approached his first seated passenger, he found himself frozen. "The words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge," he said in the interview. Retreating, he berated himself: "What kind of craven coward are you?" A few unsuccessful tries later, he managed to choke out a request "taking the man's seat, I was overwhelmed by the need to behave in a way that would justify my request," he said. "My head sank between my knees, and I could feel my face blanching. I was not role-playing. I actually felt as if I were going to perish." (Ramirez and Medina, 2004)

Challenging students of leadership to take the risk of moving away from their analytical stance visceralizes learning.

As Schon (1983 and adapted from presentation in *Strategic Management Program*, The Wharton School, 1982) has noted in the context of professionals learning on the job, we learn most from situations in which we are both surprised and do not get what we want (see Table 1).

Table 1: The role of surprise and learning

	Not surprised	**Surprised**
Get what I want	Low learning, one's core skill.	Low learning, because one gets what one wants either way. One attributes it to luck (hence no learning) or to one's skill, but rarely do we reflect when we have achieved our desired results.
Don't get what I want	Low learning, high externalization of the reasons why we were unsuccessful. The constraint was immovable, the politics were all against it, etc.	High learning, yet an uncomfortable place to be. What went wrong? Why did it not turn out the way I expected? What might I have done differently and with what possible result?

This framework shows how often that it is only in hindsight, after people have not got what they wanted, that they understand insights about their tacit – and often unrealistic— expectations. Only then do they develop richer strategies resulting from disappointment and surprise.

Thickening cases through enactments

We suggest that case studies used by business educators can be "thickened" (Geertz, 1973; Darling *et al.,* 2005) with greater use of enactments of the espoused strategies, actions and getting feedback on them from fellow learners and instructors.

We take, as an example, the Dashman case (Meriam *et al.,* 1942), a classic example from Harvard Business School. A company president, Manson, became aware of the challenge of raw-material shortages at his company. He appointed an outsider, Post, to a new position to co-ordinate purchasing procedures among the 20 relatively independent plants. Post chose a centralizing strategy – oversee all purchases in excess of $10,000 and receive approval from the president and the board. He sent letters to this effect to the 20 plant purchasing executives, dismissing the advice of his assistant, Larson, a seasoned insider, who suggested he visit the plants before sending the letters. Most of the plant purchasing executives replied: "The suggestion seems a most practical one. We want to assure you that you can count on our co-operation." Six weeks went by with no requests for his approval, but the factories seemed to be producing at normal levels.

This brief case offers considerable material for a rich discussion about headquarters and field dynamics; challenges of an outsider entering a new culture; the differences between formal authority and informal authority; and resistance to change. Good case teachers will ask: "What might have been Mr Manson's choices for dealing with the risk of material shortages? How did he oversee Mr Post's entry?" Or: "What should Mr Post do now to uncover what is going on?" One can move forward in time by inviting students to speculate on Post's next moves and the plant-level purchasing executives' counteractions.

This discussion can move back and forth between diagnosis and proposals for action from an observer point of view (see Figure 1), even if invited to think about "What would you do if you were Mr Post, Mr Larson, or Mr Manson?" These scenarios encourage ideas from the sidelines as to what Post or Larson should do. But they miss the opportunity to learn viscerally by actually taking up the role and enacting an approach and having someone else respond within the frame of the encounter. This gives both those who take the risks in playing those roles as well as observers more access to the inevitable gaps that exist between talk and action (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Schon's (1982) presentation in *Strategic Management Seminar*, The Wharton School, for example, takes a moment while teaching the case to invite students to jot down their responses to certain questions or statements. In the Dashman case, it might be the moment when Post asks, "What should I do now?" to his assistant, Larson. Schon's questions are:

- What are you thinking and feeling (as Larson, whose advice to visit the plants before sending the letters was ignored)?
- What is your strategy? (Which course of action would you follow?)
- What is the first line of your response?

This allows the students to be cast in the drama at a particular scene. Thus, everyone in the class has to inhabit a particular character in the case at a particular moment.

Rather than proceeding analytically with students sharing their strategies, the students are invited into a plenary "fishbowl" or into small groups. There they have someone enact the first line of dialogue between Larson and Post until they have explored the exchange for two to five minutes. This reinforces the co-created nature of most organizational actions—action and reaction—and how frequently the intended effect is different from what actually happens. Furthermore, it turns a case into a mini "Rashomon" experience (Kurosawa, 1950), whereby students not only see, but also feel, how different roles and personalities perceive the situation and its resolution. As with the military maxim "no plan survives contact with the enemy" (Barnett, 1963) students learn resilience, as they can restart and explore different approaches. In reflecting on his many years of engaging students with this case, Roethlisberger (1977) noted how rarely anyone suggested the response, "I don't know, but perhaps we could visit." Yet even coming up with this suggested response is cognitively different from actually saying it to one's boss, who had previously ignored similar advice.

Steps of adding enactments to existing cases

To add enactments to traditional case teaching, we propose a sequence of steps to be added to the diagnosis—discussion about proposed actions. We use the Dashman case as an example, but the method described here can be used with most business cases—surely with cases in the fields of organizational behavior, HR management and leadership.

In our experience, it is important to move on to the enactments as quickly as possible. Limit the questions allowed regarding analytical discussion of the case. It may be interesting to discuss what general management issues are raised in a specific case. In the Dashman case, for example, topics covered could address the above-mentioned headquarters and field dynamics; challenges of an outsider entering a new culture; the differences between formal authority and informal authority; and resistance to change.

1. **Time-lining.** As a first step toward the enactment, we suggest time-lining. Using the whiteboard, students could identify key moments in the case where the course of events could change if stakeholders acted differently. Note that it is easier to move back in time—for example, Post should have visited the plants instead of writing letters to them—than moving forward, for example now that Post's letters have been sent out and no change has been experienced, what can we imagine can be done to recuperate? Have each class member identify the most significant or challenging moment and use it as the point of enactment. The differences can be illuminating. However, we suggest limiting the time to 10 minutes and selecting the point for enactment relatively rapidly. For an illustration of the enactment method in this paper, we pick as a key moment a fictional encounter between Post and the head of one of the plants after Post has decided to actually contact the plants directly.

2. **Setting the scene.** Take just a few minutes to set the scene. Is the conversation between Mr. Post and the plant manager in person or over the phone? If it is a phone conversation, two chairs can be put back to back for the enactment. If it is an in-person meeting, where does it take place? Are we in Mr. Post's office or at the plant? What does it look like? Who sits where? Who else is present in the room?

3. **Casting the characters.** Casting the characters can be done on a voluntary basis or the instructor can select the participants for the roles. It is also possible to have the main character, Post, selected or volunteer and he or she can pick the other people to role-play the other characters involved in the case. We often find it useful to select a couple of additional stakeholders who may not have been present at the actual encounter because their reactions to what actually happens may be important to better understand the dynamics. These are "flies on the wall" listening in to the discussion between Post and the head of the plant. In the Dashman can be, for example, Larson and the company president, Manson. Other interesting points of view can be explored by selecting people to listen in on the conversation, such as the heads of the other plants.

   When selecting the characters, it is important to frame how people casted for the characters enter the roles. Role-playing too often becomes an exaggerated stance of our stereotypes of the persons in those roles. Enactments are driven more by what Mamet (1991) suggests drives drama: "What does the protagonist want? What does he or she do to get it?" It is about putting oneself deeply into a given situation and business context. Allow some space for the people taking up the characters to give some emotional and rational descriptions of the people in the case while ensuring that they avoid stereotyping. Questions to ask are "How would Mr Post describe himself?" and "What is his relationship to the plant manager?" For example, when describing Post entering the conversation, we may assume that he has some feelings of frustration and anger toward the plant manager, as his request has not been followed. It is important to inquire how the person taking up Post's role would deal with his frustration and anger. This should be done without caricaturing Post, but rather showing how he or she would act upon those emotions.

The line between role-plays and enactments is very thin, but there is a difference between getting into a character and playing a role versus playing a surface behaviour. As an example, in enacting Post's character, participants would first consciously try to create a co-operative situation, whereas during role-playing they may overdramatize by using extreme behaviour—by hitting the table, for example.

Even though, in some instances, instructors may consider stepping in as a character into the case, in our experience it is better that the instructor keep his or her role as director—herewith providing more insight to the case and remaining emotionally detached from the case dynamics.

4. **Setting up the strategy.** To engage the learners who are not actively taking part in the enactment, ask all participants to jot down the opening line of the conversation: "How would Mr. Post address the plant manager?" Or Schon's three questions from above could be used: "What is Mr. Post thinking and feeling? What is his action plan? What is his opening line?"
5. **Enactment.** These first four steps have prepared the scene for the first enactment. While it is challenging and requires a rather direct lead from the instructor, this initial setup should take 10-15 minutes maximum. Then the instructor gives the catalyst for action—for example, Post walks in and sits down and allows a maximum of five minutes for the characters to enact. There are no preset rules of when to intervene or stop. With practice, however, one improves stagecraft. In our practice with enactments, it is usually helpful to intervene when, for example, the interaction becomes repetitive (e.g., Post and the plant manager get into a cycle of Post asking for explanation why his approval was not asked for and the plant manager replies that there was no purchase above $10,000) or silly (e.g., the plant manager suggests the highly incredible excuse that suppliers now deliver for free) or when there is nervous laughter from the enactors. Another sign can be when the observers lean in and begin suggesting "analytical" solutions.
6. **Debriefing.** After this first strategy, ask the "other person" in the case—the plant manager—how he or she perceives the situation. Then ask "Mr. Post" about his or her analysis and suggested actions. Discuss briefly how successful it was. Bring the stakeholder observers—Larson and Manson—into the discussion, as well as student observers.
7. **Second and third rounds of enactments.** Ask the observers if they have different plans of action. As students start describing their plans, explain to them immediately that this is no place for analysis, only enactments. Switch the role of Post to one of the students suggesting a different plan. It is often interesting to use very dissimilar solutions—usually suggestions are riskier in the second round of enactments. Keep the person in the character of the plant manager or, as an option, ask the first person who enacted Post to take up the role. At the debriefing of the second enactment, this

switching of roles can provide interesting perspectives on the case, as students have experienced multiple scenarios.

8. **Multiplying enactments.** Finally, form small groups from the observers and enact additional scenarios in the class. The instructor can then list the alternative action plans enacted and discuss their success in the conversation. In the Dashman case, for example, the first two basic strategies are often the co-operative and the confrontational ones. In the additional enactments, these can be extended with alternative ones like bringing in Manson, the company president, or organizing a plant-manager workshop.

The instructor now can choose to terminate the case discussion and move to the next item on the teaching agenda or continue with adding analytical and theoretical inputs to the case.

Conclusions

The enactment process offers a solution for some of the critiques of management education, especially its excessively rational/analytical bias and its focus on thinking versus acting. We see the following advantages in using critical incidents to deepen the work with business cases.

- ***Active practice.*** Enactments are valuable because they focus on the difficulties we have in producing a strategy. Many times people have in their minds an effective strategy such as "As Post, create a non-defensive climate so that you can better understand why the plant manager is resisting the centralization of the large purchasing contracts," or "Mr Post needs to assure the plant manager that their goals are the same." Yet, when these strategies are enacted, they do not produce the desired result. Other students observing the enactment can give feedback that a person has come across very differently from what he or she might have intended, closing the gap between espoused and theory in use.
- ***No one best way.*** There is no one good answer, no one best way for resolving a problem we encounter through the enactments. The variety of outcomes allows for alternative strategies (Gilmore, 2000). The development of alternative strategies enhances the range of approaches available to participants.
- ***Developing a repertoire.*** Participants develop resilience as they get comfortable with greater ambiguity and trust their gut to risk a variety of different approaches. They experience the power of silence to draw others out.
- ***Developing a perspective.*** Chance to see key roles (function, level), positions (tops, middles, front-line), and professions from the inside rather than as a spectator—which often leads to stereotyping or caricature.

Those in management and leadership education need to draw on sport more often. In sport, learners are often frustrated by the gap between knowing what to do—returning a tennis serve or hitting a golf ball out of the sand trap – and not being able to consistently execute. Enactments are similar to improvisational work in theatre or jazz (Hasse, 2004). One is preparing, but always for situations that will require adaptation. Improvisation work begins with some initial sense of direction, but it is not overly elaborated or specific. This storyline has a directional pull, but it offers a fair amount of opportunity for creativity—both in how to get there and whether a more interesting destination is discovered during the journey. As with authentic vision and change in organizations, it is co-created.

In today's context, visceral learning about risk—that Milgram described earlier—is critical to being effective in organizations. Enactments create that risk for all the stakeholders taking up roles in a chosen case.

In noting the increased ambiguity that leaders face, Weick suggests a different conception of leadership than the heroic concept of the leader who knows the way and helps or empowers followers to get there:

> The effective leader … searches for the better question, accepts inexperience, stays in motion, channels decisions to those with the best knowledge of the matter at hand, crafts good stories, is obsessed with updating, encourages improvisation and is deeply aware of personal ignorance. People who act in this way help others to make sense of what they are facing … sense-making is about how to stay in touch with context. (Weick 2001)

Enactments allow learners of leadership to practise these skills in a safe, collegial learning environment. The learning that this process can produce has real-world applications and provides an outlet for reflection and analysis that would otherwise be unavailable

Notes

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Points for Thought

- We often experience the knowing-doing gap in our lives—such as in sports, in cooking or in specific skill areas. This gap that can be powerfully brought to students of leadership by adding to business cases enactments of interpersonal challenges in the cases
- Enactments brings analytical cases closer to life, moves them towards the drama the original situation was erected. Enacted cases deeply connect students to what the key players in a case want, what do they do to get it and what alternative ways there are.
- Instructors can add enactments to most business cases by setting a timeline for the case, picking a dramatic point, setting the scene and casting the characters, and enacting the situation multiple times with multiple strategies and courses of action.
- Enactment is an active practice that helps students to develop a repertoire for handling high-tension interpersonal situations, getting to know themselves, their own preferred ways for acting and its impact on colleagues.