GUIDE TO USING THE CASE METHOD

Introduction

This is a case method course. You will be asked to participate in the discussion of 10 cases. The main element of each case will focus on how a “virtual” company (lithographic printing) deals with the subject that is presented each week in the form of the narrative posted on the course web site. Using these cases will allow opportunities to identify and solve sustainable development implementation problems through the use of a discussion forum. This should help you learn how to effectively use the tools, techniques and concepts that combine to form the ability of the case company to move down the path to sustainable development.

You must remember that the focus each week is on the topic. The case is used just to help illustrate the topic and to allow the students to develop their knowledge of that topic using the case and independent research on the topics that interest the student the most. Each week the student will discuss the case with your fellow students on a discussion board that can be accessed from the tool bar on the course home page http://courses.dce.harvard.edu/~envre105/

Basically, the case method calls for a careful diagnosis of an organization’s ability to move down the path to sustainable development. You will be recommending specific strategic actions and vetting them with your fellow classmates on the discussion board. Appropriate actions not only allow the case firm to move down the path to sustainable development in the long run, but also describe how it can develop and use core competencies to create value that will enable it to maintain its journey to sustainability.

The case method has a rich heritage as a pedagogical approach

Critical to successful use of the case method is your preparation. Without careful study and analysis, you will lack the insights required to participate fully in the discussion of the case. A moderately structured framework is presented in this Guide to help you prepare yourself to use the case method in this course.

Using the Case Method

The case method is based on a philosophy that combines knowledge acquisition with significant student involvement. This method brings reality into the course. When developed and presented effectively, with rich and interesting detail, cases keep conceptual discussions grounded in reality. A case is presented in narrative form. It provides motivation for involvement with and analysis of a specific situation that is faced by a company seeking to move down the path to sustainable development. By framing
alternative strategic actions and by confronting the complexity and ambiguity of the practical world, case analysis provides extraordinary power for your involvement with a personal learning experience. Some of the potential consequences of using the case method are as follows:

- Case analysis requires students to practice important managerial skills involved in keeping an operation on the path to sustainable development. These skills include: diagnosing, making decisions, observing, listening, benchmarking, and persuading.
- Cases require students to relate analysis and action, to develop realistic and concrete actions despite the complexity and partial knowledge characterizing the situation being studied.
- Students must confront the intractability of reality – complete with absence of needed information, an imbalance between needs and available resources, and conflicts among competing objectives.
- Students develop a sense of what it takes to move down the path to sustainable develop and how to manage this journey.

This case method can help you develop your analytical and judgment skills. Case analysis also helps you learn how to ask the right questions; i.e., the questions that focus on what it takes to move down the path to sustainable development and the core strategic issues that need to be addressed to do so. Students aspiring to work in the sustainable development field can improve their ability to identify underlying problems, rather than focusing on the prescription of best practices that proliferate in this field. This approach vicariously broadens your experience base and provides insights into many types of sustainable development situations. Such indirect experience can help you make a more informed career decision about working in this area of the environmental management field. Finally, experience in analyzing cases definitely enhances your problem-solving skills no matter what career decision you make.

**Student Preparation for Case Discussion**

If you are inexperienced with the case method, you may need to alter your study habits. A lecture-oriented course may not require you to do intensive preparation for each class period. In such a course, you have the latitude to work through assigned readings and review lecture notes according to your own schedule. However, an assigned case requires significant and conscientious preparation before class (i.e., the weekly discussion summary in this course). Without it, you will be unable to contribute meaningfully to the discussion during the week (on the discussion board) and the participation in the Monday evening summary discussion before we move to the next topic. Therefore, careful reading of the narrative and the case and thinking about the case facts, as well as reasoned analyses and the development of alternative solutions to case problems, are essential.

Case preparation is a personal matter of developing an individualistic problem solving style. There is no one correct way to prepare with a case. However, the following
approach may help you develop your own style for using the cases to better understand the path to sustainable development:

1. First, read through the narrative presented each week and see how the topic is presented.
2. Next, read through the case quickly to get a sense of the information that is being provided. An important objective is to get a sense of the protagonist, and what the situation is like.
3. Read the case again very carefully, annotating, highlighting and distinguishing important information, omissions and questions raised by the reading. Put yourself in the position of the protagonist and develop a sense of involvement in the problem that is posed. Keep in mind the lessons presented in the narrative. How can this help you with the problems in the case?
4. Define what you believe to be the basic issues. Determine if there are any deeper underling issues. Maybe you will have to read some additional material to even understand these issues. Or perhaps you will learn about these issues when you monitor the discussion board once the discussion has begun.
5. Identify the relevant areas for analyzing these issues, perhaps noting each one on a separate sheet of paper. What actions may need to be taken?
6. Go back through the case writing down on your work sheets the facts that are relevant for each of your areas of analysis. You may make clear and well-informed assumptions about necessary but missing information.
7. Study the information as you have sorted it out, weighing both the qualitative and quantitative evidence carefully. Note your conclusions for each area. Choose a course of action from the analysis and explicitly consider and reject plausible alternative courses because of the analysis.
8. Develop a plan by which the desired action may be achieved or implemented within the case context (i.e., organization, people, and other constraints encountered in this situation).
9. Test the plan and the analysis on the course discussion board with your fellow classmates. In this way, you can learn from each other’s thought patterns and problem definitions to improve your own thinking. A separate Guide has been prepared for helping you use the discussion board.
10. Prepare to participate in the weekly summary discussion of the cases every Monday. A separate Guide has been prepared to help you understand how to better participate in the summary discussion.

Discussing the Case on the Course Discussion Board

The discussion board is a place for you to express, support, and defend your conclusions and recommendations. You will learn through controversy and discussion. The effective use of cases as a learning vehicle depends heavily on your participation on the discussion board. Through interchange and constructive controversy, you can build analytical skills, develop judgment, and gain conceptual understanding of each topic covered in the course. You have a responsibility for yourself to participate and it will help the learning of all the other students in the class. There will be a great sense of diversity in the
discussions since our distance learning students will join you from all corners of the world. They may have a different perspective on an issue based in some part on their culture. Discussion on the bulletin board will promote rigorous thinking and develop communication skills. It encourages you to respond to issues raised by other students.

It is not sufficient to just give your conclusions in the discussion each week. You may have to share how you came to those conclusions. The following questions are among those that are generally relevant to all cases:

- What are the objectives of the protagonist?
- What decisions must they make?
- What problems, opportunities, and risks does the protagonist face?
- What evidence or information can you provide to help the protagonist make the decision? Is the information reliable and unbiased? Can you improve the reliability of the information through some independent research?
- What alternatives courses of action are open to the protagonist?
- What criteria should the protagonist use to judge the alternatives?
- What action should the protagonist take? WHY?
- How should the protagonist convince others that the approach is best?
- What did the protagonist learn from this case?
- What does the case do to help the protagonist learn more about the path to sustainable development?
- How does the case relate to past cases?

You also need to “listen” to what is happening in each case discussion. It is easy to become so preoccupied with what you think that you become closed to the thoughts of others involved in the discussion. The measure of your individual progress in any of the case discussions should not be based on your assessment of whether your ideas were right; but rather on how much you took from the discussion that you didn’t know or understood when you entered the discussion.

You are being graded on your participation on the bulletin board. Please refer to the rubric in the course requirements section of this web page and the Guide to Using the Discussion Board. Understanding this matrix will help you participate more effectively on the bulletin board. The teaching assistant will provide you with your grade for each submission. If you do not submit, you will receive a “zero” grade for that posting.

Participate in the Summary Discussion on Monday Evenings

In the Monday night session, the Instructor will allow you to summarize this case. He will then help you to explore fully the ideas you’ve developed, leading you into a consideration of areas you may have missed. Finally, you will be required to make a decision or to point to the right direction. The class will seek to summarize the discussion and draw out the useful lessons and observations that come from the case issue and from the class discussion. You need to complete your discussions on the bulletin board by Sunday. Distance learners can contact their resident graduate student.
representative with information for them to present on their behalf. Please read the Guide to Participating in the Weekly Summary Discussions.