Chapter 15

Case-Based Teaching in Short-Term Management Development Programs: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author discusses how and when cases should be used or not, during short-term educational programs, either company tailored or open enrollment, and designed for midlevel and executive level managers. Reflecting on personal experiences of case-based teaching in short-term programs, the author shares two cases. One was an extremely successful integration of an extensive Harvard Business School case study into a company-tailored executive educational program conducted for a leading Russian insurance company, with about 200 participants (branch general managers who were leading teams of about 1000 employees and branch HR managers). The other was a contrasting story of failure. The cases are supplemented with reflections and summaries of lessons learned, along with frameworks for successful planning and delivery of case-based short-term educational programs.

INTRODUCTION

Many observers often perceive the majority of business training to be a waste of money and time. Like a quick weight-loss program that almost never works, such training is often organized as a stand-alone event, disconnected from the company’s context and actual needs, rarely influencing people’s behavior, and thus acting only as a quick substitute for the change actually needed (Maister, 2008). A company typically organizes a training event by simply deciding what the company wishes its people could do, and assigning a budget to a training manager with orders to arrange a good program. This oversimplifies what an effective program actually requires, leading to great inefficiency and disappointing both participants and initiators of the program (Maister, 2008).

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However, companies assign huge and ever-growing budgets to learning and development needs, in an attempt to keep their talent up to date with market challenges, and as a reaction to the inability of many universities to deliver knowledge and skills ready for utilization at a workplace. Whether training is executed in-house, recently reported as a growing trend (“Keeping it on the company campus,” 2015), or by external providers, there will always be a search for efficient tools to reach educational goals.

Common views of management education classify training as formal training, informal training, embedded learning, and innovation. Formal training is scheduled instruction that a designated trainer delivers in a classroom or similar setting, while informal training refers to unscheduled instruction or coaching that co-workers or supervisors provide during work (Stern, Song, & O’Brien, 2004).

In the author’s experience, cases may be effectively integrated into short-term educational programs to help address the task of making education more effective. Of course, long-term programs have certain advantages for integrating cases. They unite a group of people who are already known to each other, and might already have had some exposure to case method, in a learning environment characterized by lower levels of personal risk and more effective interpersonal communication. Instructors have more time and flexibility to adjust and manage the process. However, cases may also produce positive outcomes in short-term programs that require focusing more closely on group dynamics and taking account of the specifics of more diverse groups, where participants do not know each other and must quickly break the ice.

This chapter evaluates and discusses the possibilities and limitations of case-based teaching in short-term educational programs such as seminars, trainings and workshops, and coaching sessions. The author attempts to find a match between learning needs, teaching means, and the right type of educational event; to explain which type of case-study fits best in various teaching/learning situations; and to suggest a framework for such educational events and their successful delivery. The chapter also addresses challenges of case-based teaching in short-term programs, with reflections on the author’s personal experience, and suggests frameworks that take account of important factors for preparing and leading a class.

1. SHORT-TERM MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: SEARCHING FOR A CASE STUDY THAT FITS

Role of Short-Term Educational Programs in Management Training

The general umbrella of management education covers a variety of programs. However, most postgraduate education is about educating participants, rather than just a transfer of knowledge (Pons, 2007). If the nature of business training is about developing skills, it may be compared to physical training where an instructor suggests activities that engage the muscles requiring special attention. This analogy implies that:

"To help people to develop as managers doesn’t mean discussing management (or, even worse, leadership) but does mean putting people through a set of processes in which they have to experience, try out, and develop their emotional self-control and interactive styles." (Maister, 2008, p. 136)

Making a program effective and efficient requires matching learning and development needs with the appropriate means of delivery, taking into account the specifics and nature of the program, as well as its implicit opportunities and limitations. Unfortunately, in most training programs, the content merely deals with understanding and knowledge. Knowing about management does not equate to doing it; hence,