**Session Title:**

‘Ripped from the Headlines:’ Reimagining Case Study Methodology to Increase Student Engagement and Target Soft Skills

**Abstract:**

Case studies have been used effectively for almost a century. The practice however has been criticized recently for not only failing to accurately simulate organizational reality, but also for failing to effectively assist students in skill development. This session is designed to reimagine the case study by using current event scenarios that are ‘ripped from the headlines.’ The use of very current events, in conjunction with the traditional case study process, has the potential to engage students more directly in the reality and immediacy of the organizational issue. Further, this process may also motivate students to think creatively and critically as they seek to determine solutions and make recommendations to problems that have no known resolution.

**Key Words:**

Student Engagement; Scenario-based Case Methodology; Critical and Creative Thinking Skills

**Introduction:**

This Activity/Exercise session is designed to explore the re-imagination and reinvigoration of the case study methodology. Case studies have been used effectively for almost a century, however the practice has been criticized recently for failing to accurately simulate not only organizational reality, but also for not effectively assisting students in skill development. By shifting from a retrospective case study focus to the use of current news headlines, it may be possible to revitalize the case analysis process, extending and expanding the effectiveness of this time-tested practice. Further, by creating scenario-based cases using the most recent headlines it may also be possible to create an immersive organizational story that motivates students to apply not only the traditional critical and analytical thinking and reasoning but also to engage students’ creative thinking abilities as they create unique, imaginative, and future-focused solutions to the problems posed (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002).

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implication:**

The case study methodology is a time-tested business education technique. Adapted for the Business School almost one hundred years ago at Harvard University, the stated goal of the case study was to “stimulat[e] debate and innovative thinking … and in doing so, have a more positive impact on society” (MacLellan, 2018). Today, business schools the world over use cases to not only to help students learn “the art of managing uncertainty” (Teaching by the case method, 2017), but also to generate “decision forcing” exercises, whereby students are to able practice making the kinds of managerial decisions that await them after graduation (MacLellan, 2018). In addition to providing a foundation for the presentation and discussion of perspectives broader than merely the instructor’s, the case method also creates the opportunity to pursue unique “teachable moments” not possible in a traditional lecture setting (Teaching by the case method, 2017). Allowing – even requiring – students to assume the role of researcher, reflector, and decision-maker, the case method enables the ability to simulate real-world business problems in a way that other approaches have not to date (MacLellan, 2018).

Where the case study methodology clearly has had, and continues to enjoy, success as a business education tool, as the environment for businesses – and business schools as well – has changed tremendously across the last century, there are currently some drawbacks to this technique. One of the more frequently cited criticisms of the use of case studies is the historical or retrospective analysis of business problems. Many cases are written after a major event – positive or negative – has occurred in the life cycle of an organization. This diminishes the need and/or opportunity for critical or creative thinking. Reflective analysis provides the ability to answer the question “what would I have done differently?” and provides an accurate foundation for critical analysis. Focusing solely on hindsight or an historical perspective however may not provide the best foundation to assist students in learning how to proactively manage the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) conditions of the present or the future (Anand, 2017).

Further, by the time many cases are written and published, significant and substantive changes may have occurred in the external and organizational environment. When this occurs, the retrospective analysis of that organization may at best offer little insight and at worst lead to a false sense of decision security in the students preparing the case analysis (Anand, 2017: Bridgman, Cummings & McLaughlin, 2016). Anand (2017) also notes that the case study method has become a “static model” that may not only ignore the very recent events, but also may not accurately simulate the type of experiential learning desirable for 21st century business students. In addition, having followed the traditional methods of construction, some business cases may also inappropriately reinforce the myth of the ‘hero CEO’ or another singular organizational decision-maker, and minimalize the influence or inclusion of others – both within or outside the organization (MacLellan, 2018). Moreover, student learning is also often further diminished when students search the internet and plagiarize previously prepared and uploaded answers to textbook cases.

Finally, though designed specifically to place the student in the role of decision-maker, the drawbacks stated above may not allow students to truly assume that role when environmental and/or organizational conditions have changed substantially from the case’s stated conditions. As a result, the use of this technique may not achieve the intended goal. Further, the retrospective approach to analyzing and solving past problems may not allow students to develop both the critical and creative skills required of today’s graduates.

As a result, building forward from the foundation of the historical case study, there appears to be an opportunity to reimagine the process and leverage the inherent benefits and minimize the noted drawbacks. The creation and use of future-focused stories, the foundation of scenario-based learning, has the ability to shift the thinking of management educators – from a “solution-first” focus, to one that more effectively allows students to explore the myriad of solutions possible (Rosson & Carroll, 2002). For example, asking students to advise Netflix how to manage competition from not just the wide variety of other content-creation organizations, but from popular video games like Fortnite may help to expand the students’ conceptualization of competitive environment. Similarly, asking students to explore the strategic competitive ‘next moves’ by Facebook, in the era of data security and fake news, may help students more deeply determine who an organization’s stakeholders are and how their conflicting needs may be balanced. In this way, management professors may have a more powerful tool to assist graduates in becoming agents of change.

**Learning Objectives:**

* Explore the intended uses, applications, benefits and challenges associated with the current use of the case study methodology
* Collaborate in the creation of ‘new’ case studies utilizing organizational current events that have been ‘ripped from the headlines’
* Design case studies to specifically target the ‘soft skills’ required by the 21st century workplace
* Initiate discussion on alternate methods/processes that can enhance the effectiveness of the case study
* Expand the comfort level of management instructors in creating, utilizing, and facilitating future-focused case scenarios with an unknown and uncertain resolution

**Exercise Overview:**

This exercise is designed to collaboratively explore the current case study methodology -what works and what problems exist. With a deeper and broad understanding of the current process, the exercise is then designed to investigate a variety of techniques to both increase student engagement in the case analysis process and to target the ‘soft skills’ business graduates – at all levels - should possess. One specific method of case study adaptation will be shared – using ‘ripped from the headlines’ news stories to not only spark student interest in the case under study, but also to shift from a retrospective analysis and solution recommendation focus to one that is more future-focused.

This process can be used for a wide variety of management disciplines where the case study method is currently used – strategy, human resource management, organizational behavior, and general management. This activity could be facilitated for either a small to medium sized group, in order to enable both adequate ‘table’ conversation and collaboration time as well as adequate time to debrief on each of the topics covered. Rather than a session with a very specific process to share, and therefore specific end goal to achieve, an additional objective is this session is the individualization and personal interpretation/application of the discussion and case creation process such that participants are able to take the experience and continue the case adaptation process in their own work. Finally, this session is designed to assist management educators – and ultimately their students – in more deeply exploring the complexity and uncertainty of the unknown within the bounds of a traditional case study.

**Ripped from the Headlines Activity/Exercise Session Description:**

**Introduction** (5 minutes)

* History of the case study method
* Review of the literature – pros/cons of the case study method

**Participant Discussion** (10 minutes)

* Personal experiences with case studies
* Pros and cons of current use of the case study method
* WHY might we be seeing what we are seeing in case study use/students in management education today?
  + Lower student engagement
  + Less than adequate skill preparation in graduates

**Scenario-based ‘Ripped from the Headlines’ Case Example** (5 minutes)

* Process of case creation
* Rationale for ‘Ripped from the Headlines’ cases
* Student outcomes as a result – traditional retrospective case vs. future-focused cases

**Participant Case Preparation** (25 minutes)

* At tables, collaborative exploration on possible ‘ripped from the headlines’ for case foundation
* Identification of ‘soft skills’ to be targeted in the case creation process
* Identification of desired level and type of student engagement (based on class modality – online vs. on ground class sessions)
* Collaborative creation of a case outline
  + Identification of the desired **content/theory** application outcomes
  + Identification of the desired **soft skills** to target with case preparation
  + Identification of the desired **case learning outcomes**
* Discussion of assignment type considerations
  + Online or in class homework assignment
    - with structured or unstructured class discussion
  + Midterm or Final Exam

**Participant Case Sharing and Exercise Debriefing** (10 minutes)

* Participant case sharing
* Discussion of the ‘easier/harder’ aspects of creating the case

**Overall Activity/Exercise Debrief** (5 minutes)

* Overall reflections on the use of the case methodology and processes to enhance the technique’s effectiveness
* Participant thought on their ‘next steps’ to reimagine the case study
* Participant thoughts on the ‘Ripped from the Headlines’ case building process

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