

ON THE Case

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In today's resource-constrained environment, it is essential to efficiently and effectively transfer learning from the classroom to the workplace. To be successful, you must design an innovative instructional framework that meets organizational needs while engaging adult learners within the environment and context.

The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) is responsible for developing and preparing managers for weapons system and services programs. Program management is unpredictable and provides numerous dilemmas due to the many stakeholders in the process and the effects their decisions can have on the programs. To that end, DAU incorporates case studies in its program manager's course to enhance learners' problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Benefits

A good case study, according to professor Paul Lawrence, is "the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations."

According to research findings by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger in *The Career Architect Development Planner*, about 70 percent of development derives from on-the-job experiences, tasks, and problem solving; about 20 percent from the feedback of others and from





podcast

At the Defense Acquisition University, case studies are an integral part of its program manager's development course. Here's how to make best use of them.

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working around good or bad examples of the need; and about 10 percent from courses and reading.

Effective use of case studies addresses all three. They bring on-the-job situations into the classroom where discussions are guided to encourage creative approaches to addressing the situation, with feedback provided from other participants based on their analysis and experience.

The case study methodology engages learners when it is perceived as realistic and representative of situations they have encountered or may encounter in the future.

At DAU, we refer to a case as a story that describes events or problems to enable students to experience complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties confronted by the original protagonist in the case. In other words, cases bring a snapshot of real life into the classroom for analyzing, determining the root problem from the symptoms, considering alternatives, formulating strategies to address, and making decisions—all while considering alternative points of view and learning from a supportive network of fellow learners.

Types of case studies

Two types of cases familiar to most educators are historical cases and decision-forcing cases. Historical case studies typically are presented in a narrative format and include an already developed solution to an identified problem that is analyzed and evaluated. This historical perspective also is accompanied by lessons learned. Class discussion often focuses on alternative options or critique of the provided solution.

Alternatively, a decision-forcing case stops short of what actually happened, which forces participants to analyze and assess possible solutions they would consider in the situation. This type of case presents a dilemma, conflict, or problem that one or more of the characters must negotiate. In effect, decision-forcing cases

provide an opportunity to create a new ending to an old story—perhaps even a better ending—as you draw on the wisdom of the group.

Program manager's course

DAU's program manager's course is a 10-week executive education-like program whose objective is to enhance analytical thinking and decision-making skills to better lead large complex weapons systems and services programs.

The course uses about 90 case studies from actual program situations developed from extensive interviews with U.S. Department of Defense program personnel by DAU professors who write the cases. During these visits, program representatives identify the dilemmas they have personally encountered. The cases emulate reality as perceived by the people who successfully or unsuccessfully coped with the issue.

DAU's case study method is a modified version of Harvard Business School's case method. Our method employs decision-forcing cases because they give program manager students practice identifying the parameters of a problem, recognizing and articulating their own positions, coming up with alternative actions, evaluating alternatives, and arguing different points of view.

For each case study, students engage in a four-stage learning process:

- individual preparation (60 minutes)
- instructor-facilitated small-group discussion (30 minutes)
- instructor-facilitated large-group discussion (80 minutes)
- reflection (15 minutes).

The program manager's course consists of offerings at seven geographical locations throughout the United States. These offerings are deployed through a blended approach of virtual and face-to-face meetings and continue the four-stage learning process.

Faculty selection, training, and development

Faculty are selected as case study facilitators based on a proven track record of outstanding performance as a professor, willingness to

undertake the rigorous task of new case development in addition to facilitating existing cases, and successful completion of hands-on training in case design, development, and presentation.

Course instructors attend three days of training in advanced facilitation and also participate in 3.5 days each of case writing and case teaching workshops that involve simulations. Then, individually, instructors teach a case study to a group of certified faculty, who provide real-time feedback.

Instructors are taught the Socratic method to guide the group discussion using open-ended questions. Learning and exhibiting patience when facilitating is key to developing students' critical thinking skills.

Generally, there is no one correct textbook answer to a case dilemma. This keeps the discussion interesting and exploratory based on the unique experiences within the student team, which depicts a typical military program office team. Students are encouraged to write a new ending to an old story, coming up with their own alternatives, evaluation, and paths forward.

Individual faculty preparation

Instructors usually select and facilitate cases aligned with their individual professional experience and nearly always facilitate the cases they have written. This selection basis increases instructor comfort, allows them to

relate personal stories, flattens the learning curve, and reduces prep time.

To get started, DAU instructors review case learning objectives and teaching points identified in the instructor support package. As part of the review, they become familiar with the purpose of including the case in the curriculum and the performance outcome it addresses within the overall program manager course curriculum. "How to insert technology into a program" is an example of a performance outcome. Then, they focus on the two to three specific learning objectives associated with their case.

Instructors must anticipate where the discussion could go and also remain flexible since it is unknown exactly what alternative decisions or solutions students will identify and evaluate.

The facilitators produce their own individual teaching plan and approach by creating situational awareness, generating questions they plan to pose to students, and developing a wrap-up plan. The wrap-up plan ties together all the teaching points introduced during the student discussion and summarizes the outcome of this particular team.

Like operational planning, the value is in the planning, not necessarily in strictly following the plan. As Abraham Lincoln stated, "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it."

Best Practices

Invest in instructor development and preparation. Don't assume an instructor can just do it. Ensure the smooth transition from the lecturer role to the facilitator role. Include discussion time management and technology orientation.

Invest in aligning student expectations, especially if they have not experienced this type of participant-centered learning. Address expectations of class preparation, provide case analysis tools, and explain how learning group discussions will be conducted.

Design classroom and technologies to facilitate collaboration. A tiered classroom where students face one another, such as in a semicircle, encourages participation and group decision making. Audiovisual tools need to enhance the learning, not distract. Ensure virtual technology is seamless to the student and have a backup plan for unplanned events such as severe weather and technology disruptions.

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Standard operating procedures are available for learning asset management, peer reviews, and faculty certification.

Our facilitators engage learners through a variety of techniques and job aids ranging from capturing thoughts on an interactive whiteboard to role playing, polling through electronic student response systems, and sharing short podcasts to demonstrate a teaching point. Cases also are available to students in electronic formats that accommodate their tablets and e-readers.

Results, evaluations, and continuous improvement

DAU program manager case studies reflect current reality and are updated on a continuing basis by faculty interactions with serving program managers and program executive officers. Twenty percent of the cases are expected to be updated, discarded, or replaced on an annual basis to ensure relevance.

With our dispersed geographical approach, blended virtual and face-to-face deliveries provide a 50 percent reduction in travel and long-term temporary duty station expenses.

As a result of the modified Harvard Business School case study approach, in addition to critical thinking and decision-making skills, our program manager's course graduates leave with a professional network based on the initial bonding established while in this rigorous class.

Students are evaluated by instructors at regular intervals in the course based on rubrics designed to ensure students demonstrate the prerequisite skills for successful Defense Department program managers. Feedback is delivered during one-on-one instructor-participant sessions.

Students and their supervisors also provide feedback about their learning experiences using our web-based Metrics That Matter system. The average overall satisfaction rating for this course annually is 90 out of 100. The system also provides anecdotal feedback that outlines recommended improvements.

"There have been a couple of times already since I have been back in the seat that something has crossed my desk and I had the feeling that I had seen something like it before," says one course graduate. "Not only did the discussion surrounding case studies provide a vehicle for how to think through an (or several) issues critically, but they also provide an incredible library of lessons learned. When those items came to my attention this week, I had a sense that we need to look into that further because I have seen what can happen if you just proceed without knowing the consequences or fully understanding our decision. ... The course acted as a catalyst to actually learn the lessons as opposed to merely identifying them."

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