

Case Method Management

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Vern in Action

One day around 1985, when I was back in my role as a consultant to business leaders with Bain & Co, I was sitting in on the weekly management meeting of a CEO client, let's call him Vern, that I greatly admired. Watching him in action, I suddenly recognized that he was acting like a good case method teacher and this was a big part of his success as a manager.

He sat at the head of the table. He had a carefully prepared agenda which this day included a tough strategy decision. He asked John, the involved division manager to introduce the issue and provide relevant background. He then went around the table asking each of his direct reports to provide input on the decision and say what they felt the company should do, Steve, head of production, Mark, head of marketing, Jim HR and Jane, the CFO. He returned to John at the end, who would be responsible for implementing the strategy.

When Mark ventured something about consumer preferences he asked him, "How do you know that? What hard data do you have?" When Jim simply repeated Steve's argument, Vern gently said, "Am I correct, you're just agreeing with Steve? If so, just say so and we'll move on."

John's recommendation at the end reflected the majority's conventional solution and was clearly different from Mark's more audacious approach. Vern noting the difference and wishing to go deeper on the differences asked each, "How would you go about implementing your solution?" He gave them time to debate their difference and amplify their arguments, which permitted the group to visualize in time and space the two options. He didn't let the discussion get repetitive or bog down, he kept it going forward efficiently.

At one point he brought the group up short by asking John, "What piece of evidence or analysis would cause you to agree with Mark?" A moment of silence followed. Each was forced to think about what data might cause them to change their opinion.

In this meeting Vern did not reveal his own thinking, although I knew he was drawn to Mark's more audacious solution. Instead he ended the meeting asking both Steve

and Mark to use the two weeks before the group would meet again to make a final decision to do a piece of analysis both had agreed was important.

Two weeks later, with the new data and analysis, Steve and the others changed their mind and agreed on a version of Mark's more audacious recommendation. Vern closed the discussion saying "It looks like we all agree, let's do it."

Good case method teaching

As I watched Vern in action, I realized *He's doing what a good case method teacher does*. Let me highlight some of those things:

- Prior to the meeting Vern had carefully prepared a complete analysis of his own. He didn't share this analysis, but it did permit him to spot omissions and ask good questions.
- He started the discussion by focusing on the end decision. He had the first speaker summarize the key elements of the situation.
- He forced everyone at the table to get involved not just contributing to the discussion but putting themselves in the shoes of the responsible manager.
- He challenged Mark's consumer assertions asking for data and analysis.
- He cut short Jim's simple repetition in a respectful manner but in a way that deterred "bullshit."
- When an important aspect of the decision wasn't being addressed, like implementation feasibility, he asked about it.
- One of his questions, "what evidence would cause you to change your mind," forced fresh thinking.
- He did not telegraph his own thinking early, and even in articulating the consensus, left everyone on the team owning the final decision.
- Finally, though not evident in my snapshot above, let me mention one other thing which Vern did, also the characteristic of great case method teachers. He demanded high standards of performance but conveyed a deep respect and faith in his people. When he gave them negative feedback either on performance or effort, he still managed to inspire them. One of his direct reports told me, "Vern isn't fooled by my deficiencies though I try to hide them, but he makes me feel he sees gold in me that even I can't see."

Why the case method style of management is superior

It's not hard to see why a team with a manager like Vern, gets better results and also why the managers reporting to him develop more rapidly.

1. His modus operandi forces his managers to come to meetings prepared and participate fully.
2. The process of multiple viewpoints, discussion back and forth, use of data and analysis, considerations of implementation, polish the group's thinking. Invariably the final decision is more thoughtful, more creative, more pragmatic than any of the initial contributions.
3. The managers feel responsible to make the decision successful. They are not tempted after the fact to say, "You know I never agreed with Vern's decision and sure enough it didn't work."
4. Finally, practice solving multiple problems, even those for which they are not directly responsible, helps a manager come down the "experience curve" much faster. By wearing Vern's shoes they get practice for the day when they will do his job.

I became convinced teaching by the case method was superior to lecturing while teaching at INCAE and the Harvard Business School. What Vern taught me in a real world business was that managers who adopt the underlying principles of case method teaching and apply them in their management also get superior results.