**Writing Your Own Leadership Cases**

by Hannes Leroy, RSM; leroy@rsm.nl

Learning Objectives:

* Participants develop insights around the root causes of their own leadership challenges, moving beyond surface-level analysis.
* Participants develop a mindset of evidence-based thinking (moving beyond intuition) in analyzing their leadership challenges as well as implementing realistic solutions.
* Participants learn to use complex theoretical ideas by integrating them into their cases.
* Participants show true mastery of the subject by ultimately presenting their case for our students to solve.

Exercise Description

Business school students are confronted with a variety of business cases in their curriculum. For each of these business cases, students are asked to think through to a carefully selected set of problems to help them understand and apply relevant theory and academic research findings. A well-written case shows expertise in a certain area: it takes mastery to present students with an interesting problem that is neither too difficult nor too easy. In this exercise, which is the main assignment throughout the year for executive MBA students, we turn the tables on the students. Rather than having them solve a business case, we ask students to develop their own business case with one or more of their own leadership challenges as the subject.

As a test of their case and their proposed solution, at the end of class, I ask students to present their cases for other students to solve. In other words, we put their own case to the test and compare their solution to the solution that the ones others come up with. I also ask other students to make an investment decision: would you invest 1000 dollars in the solution that this person has come up with such that, if this person was successful, you would double your investment, or – if unsuccessful – you lose your money? This decision forces students to make sure that they have a solid business case for their solution. When less than half of the class is willing to make an investment, I encourage students to go back to the drawing board.

Practical details:

This exercise runs throughout a 1.5 year EMBA trajectory, where students complete one or more of these leadership cases. Often these cases will be tied into the curriculum – so for instance when students go through four weeks of class on power & politics or leadership ethics, they are then asked to write their own power & politics or leadership ethics cases. Students develop several iterations of their cases – starting with just the problem, then the update of the problem, the solution, and the update of the solution. In between those instances, we have professional coaches provide students with feedback to help improve their work. These iterations are necessary to make sure that the problems are thoroughly addressed.

Why does it work?

This exercise is interesting to students because it allows them to wrestle through their own problems – offering a clear incentive to get this right. At the same time, it is very difficult because it forces them to disconnect from their own problem/situation and look at it from an outsider or meta-perspective. Leadership problems are often wicked in that the leader is intimately connected to the problem he or she is trying to solve. Furthermore, leadership problems are often treated as different than other business problems, relying on gut, instincts, intuition, etc. rather than a good analysis of the problem and a careful work-through of the solution. This exercise forces distance from one’s own problem and a careful analysis of the different elements tying into the problem, directed towards a solution.

When does it work? (contingencies):

I have tried this exercise with MBA students as well but noticed that a sufficient level of emotional maturity as well practical leadership experience is necessary for students to be able to do this exercise. This is not to say that it is impossible for MBAs or Masters-level students but then students need to be sufficiently coached on the assignment, especially helping them understand that they indeed have problems to begin with. Participants will experience this exercise as difficult and messy – which it is. I personally see this discomfort as an indication that students are truly developing. Considering this discomfort, it is important that (1) there is a clear structure so students know how the steps lead to a clear end-goal and (2) sufficient encouragement and feedback loops to make sure that they stay on-task. As a result, this exercise is quite time intensive.

Supporting evidence:

Absent hard data (under collection), it is my current experience that this case assignment helps students come up with realistic and concrete solutions to their leadership problems. Beyond solving specific problems, students learn a systematic approach to solving leadership challenges in the future, going beyond their gut-instinct or knee-jerk reaction. In other words, this exercises aids students to develop an evidence-based mindset with regards to their leadership challenges.

Added bonus:

With student consent, you know have a large repertoire of leadership cases for use in future classes.