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by Nitin Nohria

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During my decade as dean of Harvard Business School, I spent hundreds of hours talking with our alumni. To enliven these conversations, I relied on a favorite question: “What was the most important thing you learned from your time in our MBA program?”

Alumni responses varied but tended to follow a pattern. Almost no one referred to a specific business concept they learned. Many mentioned close friendships or the classmate who became a business or life partner. Most often, though, alumni highlighted a personal quality or skill like “increased self-confidence” or “the ability to advocate for a point of view” or “knowing how to work closely with others to solve problems.” And when I asked how they developed these capabilities, they inevitably mentioned the magic of the case method.

Harvard Business School pioneered the use of case studies to teach management in 1921. As we commemorate 100 years of case teaching, much has been written about the effectiveness of this method. I agree with many of these observations. Cases expose students to real business dilemmas and decisions. Cases teach students to size up business problems quickly while considering the broader organizational, industry, and societal context. Students recall concepts better when they are set in a case, much as people remember words better when used in context. Cases teach students how to apply theory in practice and how to induce theory from practice. The case method cultivates the capacity for critical analysis, judgment, decision-making, and action.

There is a word that aptly captures the broader set of capabilities our alumni reported they learned from the case method. That word is meta-skills, and these meta-skills are a benefit of case study instruction that those who’ve never been exposed to the method may undervalue.

Educators define meta-skills as a group of long-lasting abilities that allow someone to learn new things more quickly. When parents encourage a child to learn to play a musical instrument, for instance, beyond the hope of instilling musical skills (which some children will master and others may not), they may also appreciate the benefit the child derives from deliberate, consistent practice. This meta-skill is valuable for learning many other things beyond music.

In the same vein, let me suggest seven vital meta-skills students gain from the case method:

1. Preparation

There is no place for students to hide in the moments before the famed "cold call"— when the teacher can ask any student at random to open the case discussion. Decades after they graduate, students will vividly remember cold calls when they, or someone else, froze with fear, or when they rose to nail the case even in the face of a fierce grilling by the professor.

The case method creates high-powered incentives for students to prepare. Students typically spend several hours reading, highlighting, and debating cases before class, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups. The number of cases to be prepared can be overwhelming by design.

Learning to be prepared — to read materials in advance, prioritize, identify the key issues, and have an initial point of view — is a meta-skill that helps people succeed in a broad range of professions and work situations. We have all seen how the prepared person, who knows what they are talking about, can gain the trust and confidence of others in a business meeting. The habits of preparing for a case discussion can transform a student into that person.

2. Discernment

Many cases are long. A typical case may include history, industry background, a cast of characters, dialogue, financial statements, source documents, or other exhibits. Some material may be digressive or inessential. Cases often have holes — critical pieces of information that are missing.

The case method forces students to identify and focus on what's essential, ignore the noise, skim when possible, and concentrate on what matters, meta-skills required for every busy executive confronted with the paradox of simultaneous information overload and information paucity. As one alumnus pithily put it, “The case method helped me learn how to separate the wheat from the chaff.”

3. Bias Recognition

Students often have an initial reaction to a case stemming from their background or earlier work and life experiences. For instance, people who have worked in finance may be biased to view cases through a financial lens. However, effective general managers must understand and empathize with various stakeholders, and if someone has a natural tendency to favor one viewpoint over another, discussing dozens of cases will help reveal that bias. Armed with this self-understanding, students can correct that bias or learn to listen more carefully to classmates whose different viewpoints may help them see beyond their own biases.

Recognizing and correcting personal bias can be an invaluable meta-skill in business settings when leaders inevitably have to work with people from different functions, backgrounds, and perspectives.

4. Judgment

Cases put students into the role of the case protagonist and force them to make and defend a decision. The format leaves room for nuanced discussion, but not for waffling: Teachers push students to choose an option, knowing full well that there is rarely one correct answer.

Indeed, most cases are meant to stimulate a discussion rather than highlight effective or ineffective management practice. Across the cases they study, students get feedback from their classmates and their teachers about when their decisions are more or less compelling. It enables them to develop the judgment of making decisions under uncertainty, communicating that decision to others, and gaining their buy-in — all essential leadership skills. Leaders earn respect for their judgment. It is something students in the case method get lots of practice honing.

5. Collaboration

It is better to make business decisions after extended give-and-take, debate, and deliberation. As in any team sport, people get better at working collaboratively with practice. Discussing cases in small study groups, and then in the classroom, helps students practice the meta-skill of collaborating with others. Our alumni often say they came away from the case method with better skills to participate in meetings and lead them.

Orchestrating a good collaborative discussion in which everyone contributes, every viewpoint is carefully considered, yet a thoughtful decision is made in the end is the arc of any good case discussion. Although teachers play the primary role in this collaborative process during their time at the school, it is an art that students of the case method internalize and get better at when they get to lead discussions.

6. Curiosity

Cases expose students to lots of different situations and roles. Across cases, they get to assume the role of entrepreneur, investor, functional leader, or CEO, in a range of different industries and sectors. Each case offers an opportunity for students to see what resonates with them, what excites them, what bores them, which role they could imagine inhabiting in their careers.

Cases stimulate curiosity about the range of opportunities in the world and the many ways that students can make a difference as leaders. This curiosity serves them well throughout their lives. It makes them more agile, more adaptive, and more open to doing a wider range of things in their careers.

7. Self-Confidence

Students must inhabit roles during a case study that far outstrip their prior experience or capability, often as leaders of teams or entire organizations in unfamiliar settings. “What would you do if you were the case protagonist?” is the most common question in a case discussion. Even though they are imaginary and temporary, these “stretch” assignments increase students’ self-confidence that they can rise to the challenge.

In our program, students can study 500 cases over two years, and the range of roles they are asked to assume increases the range of situations they believe they can tackle. Speaking up in front of 90 classmates feels risky at first, but students become more comfortable taking that risk over time. Knowing that they can hold their own in a highly curated group of competitive peers enhances student confidence. Often, alumni describe how discussing cases made them feel prepared for much bigger roles or challenges than they’d imagined they could handle before their MBA studies. Self-confidence is difficult to teach or coach, but the case study method seems to instill it in people.

There may well be other ways of learning these meta-skills, such as the repeated experience gained through practice or guidance from a gifted coach. However, under the direction of a masterful teacher, the case method can engage students and help them develop powerful meta-skills like no other form of teaching. This quickly became apparent when case teaching was introduced in 1921 — and it’s even truer today.

For educators and students, recognizing the value of these meta-skills can offer perspective on the broader goals of their work together. Returning to the example of piano lessons, it may be natural for a music teacher or their students to judge success by a simple measure: Does the student learn to play the instrument well? But when everyone involved recognizes the broader meta-skills that instrumental instruction can instill — and that even those who bumble their way through Bach may still derive lifelong benefits from their instruction — it may lead to a deeper appreciation of this work.

For recruiters and employers, recognizing the long-lasting set of benefits that accrue from studying via the case method can be a valuable perspective in assessing candidates and plotting their potential career trajectories.

And while we must certainly use the case method's centennial to imagine yet more powerful ways of educating students in the future, let us be sure to assess these innovations for the meta-skills they might instill, as much as the subject matter mastery they might enable.

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THE LOVING SPOON: A NEW GENERATION TAKES OVER

"Family businesses are complicated," Kendra Franklin thought as she considered the choices before her. Her parents founded ***The Loving Spoon***, a restaurant in their hometown in South Carolina, 40 years ago. The family style restaurant offered large portions of traditional "home-cooked soul food standards" at very affordable prices.

Kendra's parents were now stepping back and turning over management to her and her younger twin siblings, Sharai and Alexis. Kendra and her sisters felt ***The Loving Spoon*** needed to change.

Revenue was flat in the early 2000s, which worried the Franklins at the time; however, revenue picked up and grew at a steady pace for the past six years, and the restaurant remained quite profitable. However, the sisters worried that their parents' business model would not provide a recipe for success moving forward. They saw how quiet ***The Loving Spoon*** was at 9:00 p.m., just as the brightly lit restaurants down the street began to fill with younger patrons purchasing expensive alcoholic drinks and high-margin appetizers.

"Family businesses are complicated."

Their parents disagreed and felt that ***The Loving Spoon*** would be around long after its competitors shut down. Their father noted, "Our strength lies in knowing what we are. Our operation is highly efficient, and we have loyal customers because we rarely change our popular, traditional menu. Moreover, buying the same foods in bulk weekly gives us food costs that are 5% lower than our direct competitors in town and 8% lower than restaurants nationwide. A simple menu, low employee turnover, and high productivity translate into labour costs at least 10% lower than rivals. What more does any restaurant need?"

Sharai and Alexis seldom agreed about anything, including what should change. Alexis thought ***The Loving Spoon*** should reposition itself as a more upscale restaurant to challenge up-and-coming rivals such as *Fried Green Soul* and *McKenzie's Backyard Table*. She wanted to modernize the menu and décor, as well as expand and redesign the bar area to entice patrons to purchase more beverages, which were ***The Loving Spoon's*** most profitable offerings. She said, "What they do isn't hard to copy, especially with our experience, but we will need a loan to finance a renovation of this space." Her mother acknowledged that a refresh might attract some new customers. However, she inquired about the pitfalls: "Don't we risk upsetting our most loyal guests if we radically alter our concept?"

Sharai countered, "Why choose between our current concept and a modernized approach when we can do both? We can lease the space next door to ***The Loving Spoon*** and build a bigger, better restaurant that appeals to everyone. We will have our traditional menu, service, and seating in one space and then an upscale bar with a dynamic, premium-priced menu and modern décor in the adjacent area. Customers can choose the experience that suits them best."

Their mother interjected, "Sharai, it's hard enough to run one restaurant well. Do you have any idea how difficult it would be to manage two concepts in the same space?"

None of these options seemed optimal to Kendra. Additionally, she worried about *Sweet Abby*, the formidable competitor with a similar menu and format that had opened recently just a short walk away. The new rival had already gotten strong Yelp ratings and aggressively reached out to local churches and community groups to host gatherings and cater special events. Just the other night, she noticed a large group of ***The Loving Spoon's*** most loyal customers strolling into *Sweet Abby* for a retirement celebration. Kendra needs to gather the family together soon and discuss the options regarding the restaurant's strategy moving forward.