THE CASE METHOD: GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DARDEN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Darden’s case method is one of the best ways for managers to develop themselves into better business leaders. In our Executive Education program, you and your colleagues will actively examine real-life business situations, utilizing your experiences and insights in new ways while practicing your newly learned skills. Small group discussions and classroom debriefs ensure that you will benefit from the diversity of experience and perspective of your fellow classmates.

Studying a case is like solving a real problem in the business world. To be engaged in the learning process, you need to understand the issues of the case, to make a decision as a business leader, and to be able to articulate and defend that decision. It is important that you have a position on each business issue, and that you come to class prepared to participate. Your preparation should help you develop a point of view regarding the problem, a recommendation, and an analysis to back up your view.

Class Discussions

The effective management of a business essentially involves the deployment of various resources of a firm (human, financial, production, marketing, etc.), based on changes in a company’s strategy and its environment.

Each Darden class is designed to teach you how to make those decisions, rather than to give you detailed instructions about what works and what does not work in particular situations. The focus of each class discussions is on analysis and decision-making:

- What are the facts?
- What do they mean?
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- What alternatives are available?
- What specifically should be done?
- How and when should it be done?

You should come to class with an understanding of the issues in the case and be prepared to (1) present a viewpoint, (2) defend your decisions through questioning from peers, and (3) be open to the diverse perspectives of your colleagues. Through this process, you will become more proficient in recognizing and dealing with opportunities and problems, as well in making real-time decisions.

**Types of Cases**

The cases you will be tackling typically provide you with all the same information that the business executives involved had available to make the decisions they made. Some cases are about companies you will recognize by name, while other companies are disguised. Either way, all the situations are real. You will find three general types of cases that will expose you to different situations throughout your program. One type can be classified as the *evaluation case*. These cases describe what the company has done, and the principal purpose of the class discussion is then to evaluate the soundness of the company’s managerial decisions. A second type of case is known as a *problem/decision case*. These cases outline a specific problem management faces. The situation calls for you to consider alternative decisions and a plan of action. The third is the *general appraisal case*. This type of case provides you with information that is unstructured and requires you to evaluate how things are going, whether there are problems calling for action, and if so, what action needs to be taken.

**The Learning Process**

1. **Reading the case**: Spend about an hour reading and thinking carefully about each case. The first few paragraphs of a case usually say something about the problem—read those paragraphs more carefully. Then look through the details. Revisit the discussion questions and begin to draw your conclusions. Typically, you will be expected to:

   - Identify problems
   - Consider alternatives
   - Analyze data
   - Make decisions
   - Outline a suggested course of action
Since we emphasize involved learning, taking a personal stand on each case is critical to your success in the Executive Education program. If you take a stand, you will be personally involved in the discussions and intensely interested. If you simply read the case and remain neutral, you are unlikely to be affected or to learn.

2. **The role of the learning team:** Discussion of the case often takes place first in meetings with your small, task-oriented learning team. Learning teams are assigned at the beginning of the Executive Education program. The discussion questions associated with each case should be used to guide your team meeting. You should work together to understand the issues and to explore various solutions. Your team is usually not expected to come up with a single solution, but to explore the ideas of each team member so you can sharpen your thinking for the class discussion.

3. **Class participation and expectation:** To get the most out of your experience, you need to come to class prepared to think, to share your ideas, to respond to others, and to defend your decisions. In class sessions, the professor will facilitate a discussion in which the diverse views, opinions, and judgments among the participants are explored. The objective of the class discussion is to explore a range of options and recommendations based on the situation in the case, as well as the rationale behind those options and recommendations. The direction in which the class discussions go is the collective responsibility of the group.

4. **Personal reflection:** Finally, you need to reflect on what you learned from the experience. Take time to consider the underlying principles as well as how your initial ideas changed as a result of learning team and classroom discussions: Did you understand the situation and its implications? What were the key insights? How did others view the issues differently? Where can you apply what you’ve learned to your own activities?

A typical request at the end of a case discussion is: What is the right answer? Our method of learning is not to provide the right answer, but to provide the basis for good answers and to develop your ability to identify problems and opportunities. Frequently, several good answers will be developed and supported by various segments within the class. The objective of the case method has then been obtained: classmates have evolved well-formulated positions regarding what they would do. After that, you will find that your instructor may or may not suggest the pros and cons of various actions, or reveal what actually happened via a “B” or “C” case.

**Conclusion**

View your learning experience at the Darden School as a series of opportunities to test your mastery of techniques and to refine your business judgment. As in real life, cases typically have no right answers in the sense that a scientific or engineering problem has an exact solution. What matters is that you improve your way of thinking about business situations to become a more effective business leader. In the case method, it is largely true that how you learn is what you learn.