

Teaching Management: The Case Method Way

The committee appointed by the Government of India for future directions of management education obtained data from 108 institutions engaged in post-graduate level programmes. Committee members also visited more than 40 institutions. Among many aspects which are discussed in detail in the report, the committee found that the method of teaching in most institutions did not pay adequate attention to the specific requirements associated with 'professional' educational programmes. A 'professional' programme has to be concerned with at least three things :

- (a) Imparting knowledge that is relevant for the profession
- (b) Application of knowledge to diagnose, analyse and take corrective measures in the work that they do, and development of these competencies in laboratory like situations or some kind of guided experience
- (c) Accept a set of ethical principles that the professional practice must follow.

Most professional courses try to follow these principles. Students in medical colleges apply their knowledge in hospitals to which they are attached; architects do projects mostly followed by an apprenticeship with established architects. Lawyers have to do mock cases in their programme of study and, in many cases, work with seniors to gain experience. For students of management, many institutions have project work and a practice of placing students in work organisations during summer breaks. However, the quality of this experience in most institutions is questionable. By and large the supervised experience provided in most institutions is not adequate for 'professional' qualifications.

Over the years many teaching methodologies have been employed by business schools. There has been an increasing concern for 'student – centered', experiential teaching approaches. But these can only be regarded as improvements in imparting management education rather than serving the purpose of a laboratory to apply knowledge. The teaching method that comes closest to the requirements of management education is the 'case method'.

In the mid thirties, it was the Harvard Business School which developed the 'case method' for teaching management. The inspiration came from the Law School where live cases were used in the teaching of law. Over the years 'case method' of teaching has been systemised and refined. The 'case method' is being adopted by many business schools throughout the world. This is particularly true of schools supported by Harvard Business School and their faculty.

A 'case' provides a decision situation. It gives relevant data as available to a manager who is faced with a live situation. The data in the case is comprehensive. It provides a background of the company and industry and, where necessary, the people involved in the situation, the financial and operating data, etc. A student has to use data provided in the 'case' to identify the problem, analyse, diagnose and solve it. The case researcher has to ensure that all relevant data is provided in a case for analysis of the situation. In most institutions a case researcher has to teach the 'provisional case' i.e. the first teachable draft, at least twice to know if the case provides adequate data for purposes of analysis and decision making. Normally a 'case' is revised quite a few times before it is ready for regular classroom teaching. It is not released for teaching unless the company concerned has certified that the case represents the situation correctly. Invariably the case researcher also provides teaching notes for those who may wish to use the case.

In this method students have to prepare a case for discussion in the classroom. The teacher also assigns teaching material which provides an overview of concepts, research findings and significant thoughts on the subject. On an average a student takes 2-3 hours to prepare a 'case'. In classroom discussion a student is able to interact with other students on the case, and has the opportunity to examine his or her own position *vis a vis* the views of others. In the process, a student is able to re-examine his or her own analysis, strengths and weaknesses or biases and improve ones ability to receive and give feedback. Students are encouraged to develop respect for other people and interact with them on different viewpoints and make efforts to reconcile the many positions that emerge in a case discussion.

Hence, the case discussion sharpens the students ability to use data, rearrange facts, diagnose and resolve problems. The discussion also helps them to work with other people, and develop sensitivity towards differing viewpoints. These skills and competencies are necessary in a work situation. The teacher's significant contribution lies in preparing a course with cases that would provide insights and learning experience to students. They would also have to give reading material that provides relevant knowledge-base. The teacher's role in the classroom is to facilitate discussion and interaction that enhances learning.

In a two-year programme, a student will 'solve' anywhere between 500-600 cases. While the 'case method' helps students obtain knowledge and apply it to business and organisational problems, and it focuses on the managerial task of seeking data, analysing and diagnosing problems and decision making, it falls short of what may be called the 'hands-on experience'. A student does not quite know whether he or she has in fact solved the problem, or merely achieved some kind of consensus among peers.

There are some cases which describe how a company has handled a given situation, or a programme. The teacher uses such cases to discuss the rationale of the decision taken by the organisation. Some teachers use cases as illustration of a point or an idea they wish to emphasise, not for decision making.

In many institutions students are put on problem-solving, consulting type assignments in a company to gain hands-on experience. In some other institutions, a student shadows a manager for a specified period of time. Project work is widely used to test how well a student is able to use his knowledge. All these and similar innovations in teaching of management are useful. I believe that case teaching has many strengths and these additional features can further enrich the learning process.

Some institutions in Europe and America have developed co-partnership with industry where students work on live problems in organisations. In India the collaboration between management schools and industry has not reached this level of understanding so far. Barring a few organisations the cooperation is mainly confined to summer placement of students and occasional project work. As in the west, the industry and teaching institutions would have to actively collaborate in providing meaningful education for management. The 'laboratory' kind of experience can only be provided by industry in management education. At the same time institutions would have to develop student-centered teaching methodologies. While business games, role play and other methodologies are useful, case method is the most comprehensive method for providing knowledge and application of knowledge in a classroom situation.

