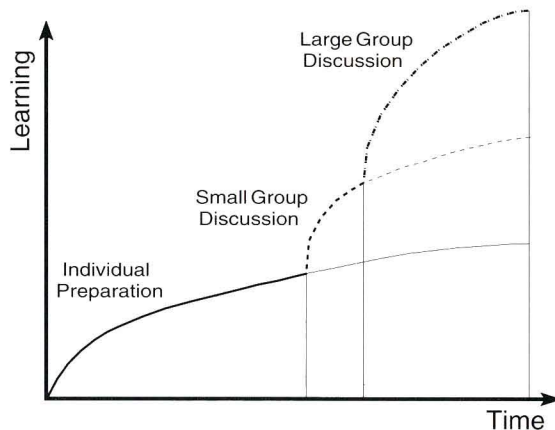


large group discussion



The third stage of the case learning process consists of the large group or class discussion. The collective efforts of all class participants aided by an instructor provide a further chance to lift your learning level higher. Achieving group synergy requires commitment from the whole group to make the best possible use of the time available and to search together for superior insights. The comparison to a live orchestra performance is a good analogy. Practice time is over. Each member now has to play his or her instrument to assure a quality performance. However, different from orchestras who play to a set of musical scores, case discussion allows considerable individual freedom to influence the outcome.

This chapter will clarify the large group discussion process. Meaningful class contribution is the central theme. Effective participation suggestions will be provided throughout.

THE LARGE GROUP OR CLASS DISCUSSION PROCESS

A standard large group discussion process does not exist. Case classes often appear to be disorderly and lacking in substance to a casual observer. "Good discussions unfold in unexpected ways that modify the programmed logic of a teaching plan," says Christensen from the Harvard Business School (*Education for Judgment* 106). Discussion process variations depend on the class objectives, the subject matter, the type of case, the place in the sequence of classes, previous classes, or other classes in other courses taken simultaneously by the same students. Additional sources of variation include the teaching style of the instructor, the chemistry of the class, the mood of the participants, the time of the year and the physical facility.

Even though a standard case class does not exist, many case classes possess the following chronological phases: (1) In-class-pre-class; (2) Pre-case or "warm-up"; (3) Case discussion; (4) Post-case or closing.

1. In-Class - Pre-Class

The in-class-pre-class phase relates to what happens in the classroom, including the interactions between the arriving students and the instructor, before class starts. During this phase there is an opportunity to organize and glance at your notes; get into the mood of the case; check briefly a point of analysis with a classmate; cheer up an uneasy colleague; or tell the instructor that you wish to volunteer to start the discussion. Many instructors welcome this initiative. Occasionally, to save class time, an instructor may ask, "Does anyone have an answer to this assignment that we can put on

the board or show on the screen?" Take the opportunity to have your work recognized.

2. Pre-Case or "Warm-up"

In many case classes, the discussion of the case is not the first item on the agenda. Different types of activities set the stage for the discussion or "warm-up" the class:

- a) *Greetings, announcements, general comments, or a humorous story* get class attention and silence.
- b) *Review of previous classes* helps reinforce points or tidy up loose ends. Be ready to contribute extra insights if there is a chance. Ask for clarification if something is still not clear.
- c) *Assignments for future cases* provide helpful advice.
- d) *News items* brought in by the instructor or you are useful to relate case issues to current events.
- e) *Discussion of readings and theoretical concepts* is used to check understanding. Take the opportunity to comment on or ask a question about a concept you or your small group wrestled with. Be prepared to respond to questions from the instructor as well.
- f) *Course context discussion* explains how the case fits within the course. Instructors may review the last few classes to show the sequence leading to this particular case, or stress the importance of the case to the course.
- g) *Anecdotes and experience* from instructors or class members may serve as an introduction to the case.

All or none of these pre-case activities may happen. Some instructors will jump right into the case discussion and skip any of the preliminaries.

3. The Case Discussion

The "normal" case discussion will cover at least five phases: (1) the start; (2) the issue(s) identification; (3) the analysis; (4) the alternatives and decision; and (5) the action and implementation plan. These phases parallel the case solving model recommended for individual preparation (see Chapter 3).

1. *Start*

Some instructors start the class discussion by asking someone (or several participants) for his or her solution to the case and then work backwards to derive the analysis. Other instructors start by asking for a definition of the issue(s) at stake and proceed in a logical manner towards the solution and implementation.

The opening question may be specific or broad and open-ended, depending on the style of the facilitator. A directive instructor may ask, "If you were Ms. Jones, would you accept the terms of agreement as presented by Mr. Clark and why?" A non-directive teacher may simply say, "How would you like to start the class?" You may be given a few minutes notice to collect your thoughts or you may have to answer immediately.

Some instructors come to class with a plan to call on one or more participants at the beginning of (or throughout) the class. Other instructors may expect individual class members to volunteer when they believe they can make a meaningful contribution to the discussion.

If you are called upon or wish to volunteer to start the class take advantage of this opportunity to say anything you believe to be meaningful. Because the slate is clean, you do not need to worry about previous comments from your classmates. However, your comments will provide the basis for further discussion. Therefore, it is useful to take your time and to explain your insights logically and clearly so that others can connect their subsequent observations in a meaningful

manner. Many instructors use a simple rule, "As long as the person who starts the class is making sense, I'll let him or her continue." So, do not feel you are being rushed — take the time necessary to explain your insights from the first two stages of the case learning process.

Effective starting contributions to a case class discussion include:

"If I were in this person's position in this case, I would concentrate on this issue because it is both strategic and urgent..."

"As sales manager in this case, I would recognize that there are a number of factors that led to this situation, such as..."

"My analysis of this case suggests that the best decision is to... and it is really critical that the first three action steps... be completed by the end of next week."

"First I would like to address the key issue, then the alternatives and, finally, my recommendations..."

2. *The Issue(s) Identification*

Normally, at some stage of the class discussion (although not necessarily at the beginning), considerable deliberation takes place to identify the exact nature of the issue(s) in the case. In some cases this task is trivial because the answer is obvious; in other cases it may constitute the central educational challenge of the discussion.

Useful contributions for clarifying the issues include:

"Going into my small group I believed the key issue was..., but Jane persuaded me that... should be the major issue because..."

"I believe this is the key decision we need to focus on because..."

"I think the issue is broader than stated by Robert, because..."

"There are three decisions that need to be taken and this is the sequence in which they should be taken..."

"I say this because the following three items... are all symptoms of a larger issue which is ..."

"The immediate issue is ... and the basic issues are ..."

3. *Case Data Analysis*

With a focus on the above issue(s), case class discussions turn to an analysis of the evidence or causal sequence of events. This stage of the discussion is where the tools, techniques, concepts and theories are used to help make sense of both quantitative and qualitative information available.

Typical analytical contributions are:

"The symptom in this case is..., but the causes are..."

"My calculations show that..."

"If Paula's calculations are correct, then the implications are..."

"Because of the following constraints... it will be difficult to..."

"If we use the concept of ..., which I think fits perfectly with the problem we are considering because ..., then the conclusion that falls out is..."

"My consumer analysis says that potential customers will first consider price and then..."

"The relevant information is contained in the exhibit on page seven."

4. *Alternatives and Decision*

A significant part of most case classes deals with the discussion of alternatives. You will be asked to generate them, discuss their respective merits in depth, identify your decision criteria, present your arguments and justify your decision(s) or recommendation(s).

Effective contributions for the alternatives and decision phase include:

“There are at least three alternatives which appear to have merits and they are: ...”

“Even though the financial return on this alternative is so exceptional, I think we need to make absolutely sure that the environmental concerns are effectively addressed.”

“Since qualitatively and quantitatively this alternative is so attractive, it makes the decision to go with this alternative very easy.”

“Since this alternative would take at least three years to implement, it is just not realistic given our short term crisis.”

“The risk inherent in Bill’s proposal is ... because ...”

“Another alternative I would like to propose is ... for the following reasons ...”

“The decision is very close. On the one hand ... whereas on the other hand ... Given these I slightly favor ... because ...”

Class consensus about the best alternative or decision may not emerge, as it may well be that more than one alternative is fully reasonable, even after careful examination.

5. *Action and Implementation Plan*

Discussion of action and implementation strategies and tactics sometimes receives scant attention in case classes

because some instructors believe proper identification and analysis of the problem and discussion of theory are more important. Also, since implementation is logically discussed at the end of class, it often gets lost in the race with the clock. How decisions are executed can be as significant as what decisions are made to solve a problem or address an issue.

Examples of action and implementation plan contributions are:

“To install this new equipment in the same physical location as the old one, we will need to build up inventory of at least one month to assure continuing flow of product to the customer.”

“The first thing we'd have to do, if we follow Kim's proposed solution, is to get approval from the Board, which would take at least three months, then ...”

“To meet the deadline of January 15, at least twenty people will have to work on this over the next six months and the following three departments are going to have to provide them ...”

“First I will have to go out and gather the information that is still missing. If it comes out as ... then I will have to do this...; if not, I would take the following steps...”

“I would pay careful attention to ... in the future.”

4. Post-Case or Closing

The class conclusion is a transition phase. It can be used to close the current discussion, link it to subsequent classes or to the ones so far completed. A student may be asked to summarize the case and its key points, although many instructors do it themselves. Sometimes instructors' summaries will take the form of questions left for students to ponder after class. Other times, the instructor will summarize

and provide his or her own framework and analytical insights that may cover some of the key points discussed in class and attempt to pull the discussion all together.

If the instructor asks you to summarize or you choose to volunteer to "pull the case together," this is a good opportunity to synthesize. For example, "Having come into class with only two alternatives, I was surprised to find that there were three more just as feasible... What we learned from the theory... we covered in the last two classes really helped in putting this decision into perspective with respect to...," or "Seeing where we managed to end this class compared to the way I came in, I can really see the benefits of ..."

With little time remaining to the end of the class, you can contribute by saying, "Because we are running out of time, I will skip past some less relevant points and go directly to the main conclusion and implementation..." It is a useful reminder that everyone in class, not just the instructor, should be sensitive to time.

If the case has been very well discussed, several options for further contributions exist. One may be to move to a basic issue discussion: "In this example, the choice of the latest and best technology appeared relatively easy. Surely, there are other situations where this decision might not be so clear cut. For example..." Another could be to enhance an earlier contribution: "I believe that in this case discussion the comments from Helen really moved us a long way into the right direction. Once we could see how the information in Exhibit 1 could be combined with Exhibit 4, the analysis and need for action became crystal clear."

The Instructor's Solution and What Really Happened

Regardless of how the discussion closes, students should not expect the instructor to provide his or her solution. Most instructors resist offering students a personal solution so as not

to demotivate them from continuing to search for their own answers.

It is also unlikely that instructors will reveal what the organization actually did. For one thing, they may not know what happened. Even if they know, they are obligated not to violate confidences and disguises. In any event, most of the time, it really does not matter what management actually did. What is relevant is how you and your classmates dealt with this case based on the information given. Some instructors believe that disclosure of the actual decision taken tends to provide premature closure to the case. Your mind will keep working away on unresolved issues much longer than on situations where the instructor told you what actually happened in the organization.

STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION PROCESS

Christensen expresses a fundamental insight at the core of the discussion process: "...teaching and learning are inseparable, parts of a single continuum ... of reciprocal giving and receiving. In discussion pedagogy students share the teaching task with the instructor and one another. All teach, and all learn" (*Education for Judgment* 99). While students and instructors share the learning and teaching tasks, their respective roles have nevertheless a distinct focus.

The Instructor

The key focus of the instructor's role is to facilitate the discussion and to provide opportunity for students to maximize their learning. Christensen conveys the challenge associated with this role: "What is a discussion, if not a voyage of exploration, with the leader as both captain and crew member?" (*Education for Judgment* 106). Some instructors tend to be more directive or of the "captain" type; others more non-

directive or of the "crew" type. There is no one best way of teaching. Instructors complement each other and at times will embrace different approaches. It would be very boring if all instructors behaved exactly the same way in the classroom.

Normally, instructors evaluate and record class contributions shortly after class. When you are taking a course which uses a reasonable number of cases, you should know whether class contribution counts toward your final grade and for how much of the grade. All the comments in this book about effective learning with cases apply whether your class contribution is graded or not. However, if class participation is graded and you do not participate in the large group discussion at all, you are not only losing a valuable opportunity to learn more, but you may also put your course grade at risk.

The Participants

Your role in the case class discussion is to learn through listening, talking and reflecting. As for your responsibilities, these are well summarized by Shapiro of the Harvard Business School as he encourages students to be committed to the "4Ps" of involvement in case discussion: "preparation, presence, promptness and participation" ("Hints for Case Teaching"). In other words, your responsibilities are to do your homework, to attend class, to be on time and to partake in the discussion. This is the minimum. To maximize learning, however, your participation must truly contribute to the discussion. You have to be willing to share your analysis, to subject your ideas to open debate, to take risks, and to critique others' positions in a positive manner.

PARTICIPATION IN THE LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

In the large group discussion learning depends upon each student's giving to, as well as taking from, each session.

Without full and regular participation, development of knowledge and skills will be compromised. Easton from the Management School of the University of Lancaster summarizes it well: "Case discussions provide an excellent example of the old adage, 'You only get out what you put in.' It is not difficult to 'hide' throughout a course which relies on discussion in a large student group, but the educational opportunity cost is very great. You can learn a great deal and develop skills quickly in the hothouse atmosphere of case discussion. It would be a pity to throw that chance away" (190). Seeing participation not as a problem, but as an opportunity with high pay-off, allows you to develop a repertoire of skills directly connected to success and effectiveness in your chosen profession.

Effective Participation

Effective participation involves not only speaking, but also active listening and reflecting. Meaningful contributions relate to case content as well as the discussion process. Both types are valuable although content contributions occupy most of the class time.

Content contributions derive mostly from your individual and small group preparation based on the information contained in the case along with your collateral experience. Content contributions separate facts from opinions; provide a significant chunk of analysis, an alternative not previously identified, critical quantitative analysis, identification of reasonable assumptions, or an action or implementation plan. In essence, this kind of contribution adds breadth, depth and understanding to the discussion of the case. The previous section, describing the various chronological phases of a case class, contains good examples of content contributions.

Process contributions affect the flow and structure of the discussion. They are based on good listening and reflecting

skills, as well as your understanding of the case. Process contributions include: questions that add clarity; suggestions that a certain area of the case needs to be explored; a linkage of points raised earlier; a call to order if the discussion has gone off topic; or a meaningful summary. Exhibit 5-1 provides examples of a variety of process contributions.

Exhibit 5-1
EXAMPLES OF USEFUL PROCESS CONTRIBUTIONS

I think...

1. we should start by..., move to...
2. we should next talk about...
3. we need to spend more (or less) time on...
4. we should go back to Jack's point...
5. we need some more explanations of...
6. we need more clarification on how theory applies here
7. we should get back on topic
8. we need to resolve this difference of opinion before we can move on
9. we should hear from Jane because...

Raising Your Hand

In most case discussions it is normal for participants who wish to speak to put up their hand. Usually, the instructor indicates that a particular individual can speak next, or may even indicate a sequence: "Susan first, then John, then Mary." There are times when the discussion will bypass this formal routine and class members jump into the discussion without the instructor's intervention. Be prepared for either mode. You control whether your hand goes up, not whether the instructor will ask you to speak. Frequency, although important, is not as important as quality. Therefore, you should be ready to contribute in every class and throughout the course you should receive your fair share of opportunities to speak.

The Right and the Wrong Answer

Effective participation does not mean you have to have an answer to every question and to be right all the time. It is acceptable to admit you don't know at times. Nevertheless, you are encouraged to experiment and take risks; there is certainly no punishment for giving the wrong answer. On the contrary, as Christensen explains, "In the discussion process, "wrong" can be more helpful than "right"; an obtuse statement can spark a charged, enlightening debate that straightforward analysis could never provide" (*Education for Judgment* 106).

Quality Versus Quantity

In any given class, not everyone can participate, especially when class size exceeds 30 students. In an 80 minute class, for example, it is difficult to have more than 25 to 30 people participate in the discussion in a meaningful way. Often, students do not participate but have lots of "gold nuggets" to offer. The correlation between willingness and ability to participate is not always positive. Sometimes, students participate but their comments are weak and shallow. It is not how much you say that counts but the relevance of what you say to solving the case or adding to the wisdom of the class. When you get the floor, take the time necessary to make your point(s) clearly. Some students seem to think they are only allowed ten seconds.

The question as to how long to talk when you have the floor is not easy. Typically, at the start of the class longer discourses are normal. When the filling-in process starts, class contributions may be shorter. For example, "Another advantage of this alternative is the relatively low cost of implementation." Most contributions in case discussions tend to be too short rather than too long. Participants say, "I prefer alternative B" and leave out the "because..." Then the instructor has to start "pulling teeth" by asking "why" and saying "please expand on your point" over and over again.

Ineffective Participation

To clarify effective participation further, it is useful to devote some time to its opposite. Ineffective participation involves comments that do not build or add value to the content or process of the discussion.

Simply repeating case facts, as opposed to using them to re-emphasize or build on an analysis, is a very common type of ineffective participation. For example, "This company is located in the western part of the country; it has about 5,000 employees and has been in existence since 1982" is not a class contribution. It just repeats case facts. This is quite different from: "Because the company is located in the western part of the country and the primary market is in the eastern part, the logistics of getting its products to market represent a significant challenge;" or "Because the company has 5,000 employees it is not realistic that the new president can establish a personal relationship with each of them." These last two contributions properly link case facts to analytical insights.

Repeating someone else's comments just because a participant wants to be heard or was not listening wastes class time.

Inconsequential interjections of the "I agree" type, without explaining why, do not add value to the discussion.

Unrealistic assumptions can be a convenient substitute for rigorous case analysis (see Chapter 3 on individual preparation for more information about assumptions). An extreme example of such shallow intervention would be, "I'm assuming that the union will not agree with proposals one and two and therefore I will propose my own solution to this situation which I'm assuming they will accept."

Using questions to deflect the discussion is counter-productive. Asking the instructor for his or her opinion or experience on a certain topic may be seen as a delaying tactic to keep the

instructor talking instead of addressing the issue(s). Similarly, asking for more information about the case or for the instructor's solution will not be valued.

Digressions in the form of irrelevant, off-topic or out-of-place comments are dysfunctional. Examples include references to some personal anecdote or past experience having little or no relevance to the case situation. Some of these comments stem from a need for some students to show off in front of their colleagues. Most digressions, however, are not conscious ones; they come from inexperience with case discussion and inability to listen and build on what has been said by other members of the class.

Monopolizing the discussion involves taking too much of the class time and, therefore, excluding others. Verbose students tend to get on the nerves of the class and frequently the class itself will use social pressure to cool them off over time.

Being disengaged is illustrated by students who show little interest in the class discussion by surfing the Web, reading a newspaper, looking bored, sleeping, or looking away from the person who is taking. They rarely contribute anything. When they engage in the discussion, their comments are shallow, off-topic, or unfocused. Their input consists mostly of short contributions that add little to the discussion.

Being uncivil with comments that attack, ridicule or put down colleagues will anger some, silence others, and certainly damage the overall discussion and underlying chemistry of the class. Students will be defensive, resist modifying their positions, or refrain from participating. Confrontation rather than exploration will become the name of the game. To turn a group of students into a learning community, Christensen endorses civility as the first basic value for this purpose. "In class as elsewhere, politeness sets a cooperative tone and encourages the openness that lets people help one another by sharing experience and insight" (*Education for Judgment* 20).

PERSONAL STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR MANAGING YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS

The secret to effective participation in a case discussion is to listen and think at the same time. Most people only talk about one fifth as fast as they think, therefore students have ample opportunity to review, reflect and organize their thoughts while others are talking. Of course many other factors will affect your participation.

Instructor Related Factors. The teaching style and skills of the instructor will have an impact on your participation. Is the instructor directive or not? Is he or she using the 'carrot' or the 'nail' approach? That is, is the approach gently to invite students' participation or to force it on them? Some instructors will ask for volunteers; some will notify in advance the students they will call upon; others will ask students randomly or use a pre-determined call list. And finally, does the instructor have specific expectations? For example, he or she may reject "one-liner" comments and insist that students speak in paragraphs to lay out their thoughts. If such expectations exist, try to meet them.

Student Related Factors. Your own personality, background, experience and culture will affect your participation. Some people are by nature more outspoken than others and will enter the discussion spontaneously without even waiting to be called upon. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses. Draw on your personal strengths and special abilities in contributing to class, recognizing that these will evolve over time.

Materials Related Factors. Course content and the cases themselves will influence your willingness and ability to participate. Is the subject matter of the course related to your past studies or some special expertise? Is the case set in a familiar industry? It is always easier to talk about something you are familiar with and you may bring a unique perspective to the discussion.

The answers to all these questions will affect your contribution to class. Next, follow some suggestions that have not been made earlier about your input in class, effective listening, note-taking, and dealing with specific challenges to participation.

Inputs to Class

Use your preparation notes. To guide your input as well as to keep track of the various points being made, refer to the notes you developed in your individual and small group preparation. The Case Preparation Chart (Exhibit 3-2) can easily be used for this purpose. You may wish to tick off the various ideas and thoughts your notes contain as points are made by you and your colleagues in the evolving discussion. This will help your concentration, prevent duplication of contribution, and remind you of complementary or additional points you may wish to make.

Organize your remarks. It is good practice to relate your contribution to what has been said before: "Joe has already given two reasons why this alternative would be attractive, I would like to add two more..." Using a simple structure, such as a list, can also be useful to keep track of your thoughts. State your ideas one point at a time and be clear and concise.

Time Your Remarks. It is wise to wait for the right time to introduce your ideas. Easton recommends practice in the process of subjugating your own needs to those of the group. "Don't throw in the brilliant, but irrelevant, idea you have just had. Wait until the time is ripe and it becomes a relevant issue" (190).

Consider various discussion roles. You can contribute in a variety of roles in class and may wish to experiment with content and process roles. The following list describes four content roles:

1. the “Expert” who has profound knowledge of the industry, one or more of the issues, or some other specific aspect of the case;
2. the “Veteran” who brings his or her personal experience to the case discussion;
3. the “Social Conscience” who introduces ethical considerations or social issues into the discussion;
4. the “Galvanizer” who offers key or unique insights that galvanize attention or truly inspire everyone.

Other roles are related to the discussion process. For example:

5. the “Rescuer” who saves the discussion when it reaches an impasse;
6. the “Impersonator” who vividly takes on the role of one of the case characters, not necessarily the key one;
7. the “Interrogator” who questions other students in a way that challenges and pushes forward their analysis;
8. the “Traffic Cop” who gets the discussion back on track;
9. the “Devil’s Advocate” who provokes the class to look at the other side of the coin;
10. the “Mediator” who offers compromise between two extreme positions; and
11. the “Referee” who settles arguments.

Effective Listening

Many students have problems with listening; they just wait for their turn to speak or are too busy thinking about what they are going to say. Poor listening creates repetition and discussions that go in circles and lead nowhere. For the discussion process to improve over time, it is important that you develop the art and skills of active listening. This will impact not only on the relevance of your contributions but also on their timing and on your overall learning from others.

One aspect of active listening is concentrating not only on what is being said but what it means. Listening is said to take as much effort as speaking. Professor Learned stresses the need to listen with an open mind: "One's preconceptions and experiences limit, so much, the capacity to hear and understand. It often takes a long time to really hear and understand another's spoken or implied words and feelings" (Christensen & Hansen, *Teaching and the Case Method* 10). The focus is therefore on listening for the total meaning, which includes the verbal and non-verbal parts of the message, or the content plus the underlying attitudes and values that are conveyed.

In case discussion, active listening includes an evaluative component. You have to compare what is said with your own ideas and positions. Do you agree with what is said? Why? Why not? Answers to these questions will certainly help you participate in the discussion.

Note-Taking

To focus your attention, assist your active listening and help you retain the information for later review, it is useful to take some notes during class. These notes may take the form of simple annotations, possibly using a different color pen, on your existing preparation notes. They may consist of ideas, insights, concepts, principles, reminders, generalizations or discoveries that will add to your preparation notes. In order for these notes to help and not hamper your participation, they must be brief, to the point, and selective. Some students use note-taking as a way of hiding from the instructor. They think that by feverishly writing everything down the instructor will see this behavior as a form of attentiveness and leave them alone. There is no need to record in detail what happens in class. Notes should act as memory triggers when you reflect and summarize your thoughts after class.

Dealing with Specific Challenges to Participation

If you find it difficult to speak up in class. The most common problem in class discussion is that a significant number of participants are shy or afraid to participate. The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to speak up. To help you get started, here are some proven suggestions:

1. Good preparation is the key. Use Chapters 3 and 4 to make sure you are well prepared and confident.
2. Adopt an offensive attitude, psych yourself to participate in class. Do not wait for the instructor to call on you. This way you have more control over your contributions.
3. Ask the instructor ahead of time if you can start the class and, if it is accepted, prepare for it. Look for a case that you like and feel comfortable with. Of course, starting off the class once is not a substitute for regular preparation and participation; it is only to help you break the ice.
4. Try making eye contact and speaking to a few people you know will support you, such as members of your small group, and try blocking off the rest of the class.
5. Psychologically reduce the size of the class by choosing a seat close to the front.
6. Make a deal with one of your classmates who appears to face the same challenge to see who can participate most often in a week. Keep a record of your respective contributions. Make it a little contest with an appropriate incentive for the winner such as a free lunch, a drink, a movie or a dollar.
7. Force yourself to raise your hand at least once in each class.
8. If you feel a serious blockage, do not hesitate to speak to your instructor. He or she will make it easier for you to participate in the discussion, either by giving you pointers

or by simply being more attentive to the subtle signals you give when you are ready to speak.

Some programs have a system of an advisor, mentor, or buddy for each student. It is wise to take advantage of such resources at any time and especially if the fear of participation escalates. For a number of students, it can become a vicious circle. They become concerned about their low participation, try to do something about it, fail, feel bad about failing, try again, fail again, and feel worse yet. That negative spiral needs to be broken or it can lead to some serious problems.

In our experience, once you acknowledge that you have a problem and are willing to deal with it, it is often half solved already. Your instructor, advisor, mentor or counselor will probably start by exploring with you where the problem lies, what is the cause of your low participation. Does it occur in every course or only in one? Are you a quiet person? Are you discouraged? Do you feel insecure? Are you participating in your small group discussion? Is the fear of talking in class based on a lack of adequate preparation or on a feeling of inferiority? Once agreement has been reached on the causes, you can start planning remedial action, setting reasonable participation goals and a monitoring or support system. Taking little steps, one at a time, and reporting to your advisor on a regular basis are effective ways of dealing with this all too common challenge.

If you are not certain of your case analysis. At times you may feel that you have not "cracked" the case. Despite your best efforts in individual and small group preparation, you still are not comfortable with the results. Thus, if the instructor asks you to participate you are somewhat reluctant. Exhibit 5-2 gives suggestions as to how to deal with such a situation effectively, what to avoid and why.

Exhibit 5-2
CONTRIBUTING WHEN NOT CERTAIN
(Including Potential Reactions from Classmates or the Instructor)

| Effective Comments | Ineffective Comments |
|--|---|
| <p>"I don't think I have a complete handle on this case, but this is as far as I got." (Your classmates and instructors know you tried to do your best.)</p> | <p>"This case does not make any sense to me." (Did you even read it?)</p> |
| <p>"This is the kind of calculation I would have done if I had had more time. This is why I think this calculation is important because it would have provided an answer to this question and, if this answer were positive, I would do the following... and if the answer were negative, this is what I would do differently..." (It shows you have been thinking and in what direction.)</p> | <p>"I did not want to calculate anything because the numbers looked strange;" or "I did not have a calculator;" or "I was not sure what the numbers meant." (It shows you have really not pushed this very hard.)</p> |
| <p>"I did not get as far as implementation because I did not think it useful to worry about implementation until I had the right alternative figured out and I think that implementation of any of the alternatives under consideration will not likely affect this decision." (You've been thinking.)</p> | <p>"Implementation? Well, implementation is clearly important. Maybe we should worry about a short and a long term plan. Yeah, implementation." (Are you trying to bluff your way through?)</p> |
| <p>"I don't know." (Honesty pays.)</p> | <p>"I think I know but if we go back to that earlier alternative we discarded, I think I can find another reason for discarding it." (Well, if it's dead, let it lie.)</p> |

If you are not prepared or will not attend. If you know you are going to be away, it is good practice to let the instructor know beforehand and, if possible, to provide a hand-in for the class. Your copy of the Case Preparation Chart (Exhibit 3-2) is an impressive reminder to the instructor that you are taking the course seriously despite your absence.

Occasionally circumstances may make it impossible for you to be prepared for a case discussion class. If this happens, tell your instructor before the class starts that you are not prepared to participate in the discussion. Waiting to see if you will be asked in class is seen as "playing games," hoping that you will not be discovered. It is not a good idea to come regularly unprepared to class.

If the language spoken by the class is a second language to you. Be aware that you may be slower to react than your classmates. The timing of your interventions may not be right. Normally, your ability to understand the second language will precede ability to speak it. Starting the discussion may be easier for you as you will have more control over your contribution and less chance to repeat someone else's comments. Your instructor should be made aware of your specific challenge. But do not use it as an excuse for not getting involved. You will be surprised how tolerant the class will be of your mistakes. And you will learn more by speaking.

If you are asked to play a certain role or to improvise. The key to effective role playing during case discussion is to identify with the actor in the case. You now have to take on the age, gender, and personality of the person whose role you are playing. This task is quite different from your normal case analysis role of putting yourself into the position, but not the skin, of the decision maker. Try to be realistic in this assignment.

If you represent a minority within the class, because of your race, your culture, your gender, your sexual orientation or your background, be aware that you may be more conspicuous. It

will be harder to hide in the group and at the same time, particularly if you are of the shy type, you may feel self-conscious and find it difficult to participate. You could even become a victim of discriminatory remarks. Do not hesitate to denounce such comments and, if needed, press for your rights.

If your culture is based on values different from the prevailing ones of the class, making an honest attempt to identify what these value differences are will help you to understand why people talk and act the way they do. Understanding is the key to communication.

Be aware that the diversity you bring to the class is positive and enriching. Learning to work with people who are different is extremely valuable.

AFTER CLASS REFLECTION

As it is difficult to participate and observe or evaluate at the same time, it is essential that you take a few moments to reflect on your learning experience after each class. With so much emphasis on learning by doing, this is especially important with the case discussion. While regular class contributions will certainly help you hone the various skills that can be developed with the case method, you must be aware that repetition can also reinforce bad habits. Therefore it is imperative that your class contributions be subject to on-going self-evaluation to seek improvement in future classes.

This after class reflection is also required to improve future learning and to sharpen your skills in all three stages of learning: individual preparation, small group and large group discussions. It will also help you prepare for case exams.

Take no more than five minutes as soon as possible after class, while your memory is fresh, to record and summarize your key observations, insights or generalizations. Do not put off this task past the same day or the learning may well vanish

from your conscious mind, as you move to the next case learning cycle. After all the time that you have already put on the case, these few extra minutes have a high pay-off.

After class reflection allows you to complete your Case Preparation Chart. This reflective task encompasses more than the classroom discussion. Your reflection and evaluative comments may relate to (1) the case content; (2) yourself; and (3) the group and participation of others. Here are some questions under each category which may help you engage in this evaluative process.

1. *Case Content Evaluation.* Did you understand what this case was all about? (If you did not, you should get help from your classmates or instructor.) What lessons did you learn from this case?
2. *Self-Evaluation.* Given your individual preparation, what did you add to the small group and to the large group discussion? What did you learn in terms of your own ability to make decisions? Did you make the same mistakes as before? What can you do to avoid repetitive mistakes? How could you have handled this preparation and participation better? What did you learn about yourself for the future?
3. *Group Evaluation.* What did you learn in terms of where the class is in the course? What is it about the case that the class missed? What did your small group add or contribute to the large discussion?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In closing this chapter, some important ethical considerations need to be stressed.

1. All of your class notes are personal. You should not share them with anyone other than your own class members.

Making notes available to others for free or for a fee is not a good idea.

2. You should abstain from discussing a case with students from other classes who will have it later.
3. Never attempt to obtain the instructor's teaching guide, manual or personal notes.
4. Do not contact the organization about which the case is written to find out what decision was taken or what happened subsequently.

These admonitions are all based on the premise that case learning cannot be borrowed. It has to be developed and owned outright by each student. According to Frederick, "The key to effective retention of learning, I believe, is in owning the discovery" (Christensen & Hansen, *Teaching and the Case Method* 216). If you bypass the above rules, not only will you greatly diminish the learning experience of other students but you may also force the instructor to discard good material. Case development is expensive; the value and the inventory of cases will suffer greatly if documented learning about such cases leaks out.

Every class member has a responsibility to assist in creating a positive learning atmosphere in the case discussion session. You can help those who are struggling with the material and/or the process by being supportive, patient and helpful. The creation of a caring class atmosphere as well as one dedicated to high standards of accomplishment is a serious ethical challenge imposed by the case method.