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WRITING AND FACILITATING CASES FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTIVISTS

by Elizabeth Zwick & L. David Brown

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OVERVIEW

The act of researching and writing a case study about an important internal issue can trigger a valuable action learning (AL) process for an NGO. Case-writing is not the only action learning technology, but it is one that can encourage reflection, analysis and learning, and innovative action to deal with important organizational issues. The resulting cases can also stimulate discussion and reflections by members of other organizations that face similar challenges, and so act as catalysts for action learning by other individuals and organizations.

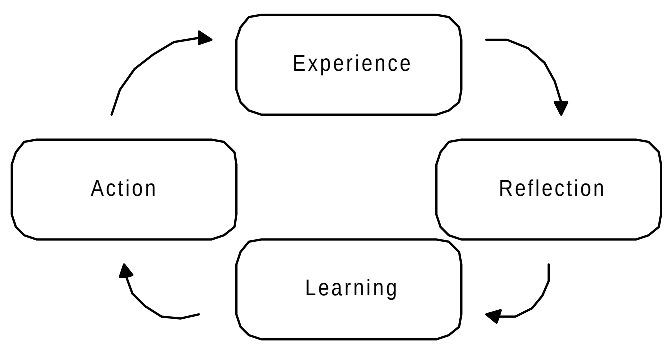
This note is written to provide initial guidance to members of nongovernmental or community-based development organizations that are concerned with learning from their own experience and with sharing that experience through the medium of discussion cases. On the immediate level, the development of case studies of key organizational decisions typically generate lessons for the individuals involved in researching, writing, and teaching them. With proper follow-up, the case study approach can also institutionalize action learning, extending lessons learned from the individual to the organizational level. More generally, the availability of a repertoire of action learning cases can stimulate sharing of experiences and learning across organizations, enhancing the capacity of a wide variety of grassroots organizations concerned with promoting sustainable development.

This note deals with three separate but closely related topics: (A) the steps involved in fostering action learning for individuals and organizations through case studies, (B) the steps involved in developing a decision case useful for stimulating mutually-empowering discussion and analysis among participants from other organizations, and © facilitating a case discussion. Readers who are primarily concerned with preparing discussion cases may want to skip the first section; readers concerned with fostering organizational action learning by examining their own organizational experience may want to focus on the first section.

A. CASES AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTION LEARNING

Action learning (AL) involves a continuing cycle of four elements represented in Figure 1. These elements recur in what may be an upward spiral of increasing sophistication, or a self-fulfilling cycle of repetitive action, or a downward spiral of decreasing understanding and less effective action. AL in the most general sense refers to a variety of approaches to learning from experience, including action research, participatory research, organizational learning and several other traditions.[1]

Figure 1: The Action Learning Cycle



Actions to improve action learning processes can emphasize any element of the cycle: experience may be apprehended in deeper and more sensitive ways; reflection may explore richer and wider possibilities; learning may build more sophisticated and generalizable concepts and hypotheses; action may be expressed in more integrated and differentiated skills.

Individual action learning (IAL) can be carried out by an individual who is willing to reflect on his or her experience, develop new concepts or frameworks to explain that experience, and undertake new strategies and actions in response to that learning. Organizational action learning (OAL) requires carrying out the processes of reflection, learning, action, and experience at an organizational level, and so building new capacities for understanding and action into the organization as well as its members.

The following steps are intended to provide some preliminary ideas about the use of case-study preparation as a vehicle for fostering OAL. They reflect our initial sense of important issues, but we encourage readers to elaborate or amend this list on the basis of their own experience.

1. **Case Identification**. It is important to get agreement among relevant organization members to develop a case study on a key problem. Possible criteria include:

a. a current situation the organizational wants to learn more about.
b. a past situation from which the organization did or could learn a great deal.
c. an experience the organization would like to share with other organizations.

Organization members will reasonably want to know why the case is being examined, and what will be the rewards to the organization and its members for investing time and energy in it.

2. **Organization Support.** It is much easier to develop a case when key leaders and members support its preparation. It is easier to get support when you can be clear about the potential costs and gains of participation for leaders and other organization members whose cooperation is needed. There will be tradeoffs according to whether the case topic is one of current or historical interest: it is easier to predict or control the outcome of historical cases; the outcomes of cases written about current topics may include unexpected answers or positive breakthroughs as well as unexpected organizational problems.

3. **Case-writer(s) Selection.** The choice of a case-writer or a case-writing team can be very important. The reputation or credibility of the case-writers will strongly affect both the information they can collect and the reception that will be given to their drafts and interpretations. Sometimes teams that represent multiple perspectives are most effective as case analysts and writers. Relevant perspectives might include:

   a. Outsiders who can ask hard questions and who have experience of other organizations to inform the analysis of this one.
   b. Insiders for whom the issue is central and who can provide detailed knowledge about the case. They will need to balance involvement with objectivity or the case may degenerate into a public relations document.
   c. Organizational leaders, who can put the issue in a larger organizational perspective.
   d. Thoughtful people who are comfortable asking hard questions and coping with uncertainties inherent in the action learning process.

4. **Reflection Process.** Understanding the issues requires initial collection of information from people inside and outside the organization familiar with the details of the case. Methods of data collection include:

   a. In-depth interviews with people who were or are involved in the issues.
   b. Interviews with groups, such as organization staff or members of other groups involved, to get their perspective on events.
   c. Examining organizational records and other "paper trails" that help reconstruct the unfolding of events.

   Different methods may be appropriate to different cases. It is important to pay attention to the presence of multiple perspectives, such varied perceptions of organizational leaders, organizational staff, donors, or clients of the agency. The understanding of the issue will evolve as more information and perspectives become available.

   It is not always easy for people to speak frankly about different perspectives on an issue, particularly if they differ from the views of higher-status, higher-power actors. It may be important for case-writers to ensure confidentiality or safety to some parties if they are going to understand all the relevant perspectives.

5. **Analysis and Learning Process.** Case writers can foster organizational analysis and learning processes by feeding back to organizational groups their initial understanding of the events of the case to see if they have accurately portrayed the events and perspectives of different parties. This process requires some care to protect the anonymity and safety of individuals and groups that have controversial views. The goal of this process is to develop a shared understanding of the issues and the perspectives through which people interpret them. This is one kind of organizational learning.

   A second kind of organizational learning is to develop new concepts and frameworks for understanding and acting on problems identified. Case writers may be able to present one or several ways of understanding events that suggest action steps to solve present or future problems. Case-writers may also be able to facilitate discussions among organization leaders and members that generate new conceptualizations and alternative action steps in response to their shared diagnosis of the situation.

6. **Action and Monitoring Processes.** Ideally the evolution of new concepts and frameworks will provide the basis for new ideas about actions on important issues, so the OAL cycle can lead to changes in organization behavior that will in turn produce new kinds of experience. It is important in this process that case-writers not "take over" the problem-solving process because of their familiarity with the issues; it is critical that organization leaders and members shape action strategies that are locally "owned" and implemented if OAL is to occur.

   If the OAL cycle is to continue, it is also important to build ongoing monitoring and evaluation into the action process so the organization is ready to reflect on new experiences generated by new actions. When case-writing is central to the process, encouraging relevant groups to read and discuss case drafts and to discuss the longer-term impacts of the events may be one way to encourage this kind of ongoing reflection.

In the long term, continued OAL may depend on the ability of the organization to create its own capacity for learning -- a "learning-to-learn" that becomes embedded in the goals, culture, and structure of the organization. But the creation of a case about its own experience learning about important issues can be a powerful stimulus for learning in the short term, as well as a stimulus for further exploration and development of its future AL capacity.

B. WRITING DISCUSSION CASES: SOME GUIDELINES

Discussion cases can be powerful tools for promoting analysis of complex situations and creative judgment about alternatives for action. Effective cases present complex situations grounded in real-life experience to which there are no "right answers." Participants in case discussions are encouraged to come up with their own analysis and recommendations for action, and good case facilitation presses participants to deepen their analyses and expand their perspectives on action alternatives without suggesting there is a right answer or removing responsibility from the participants for eventual choice among alternatives.

While discussion cases sometimes appear to be quite simple "stories" about problems facing decision-makers, the best cases have benefitted from a great deal of thought about what and how information from a potentially unlimited supply should be presented. The following guidelines suggest a sequence of activities and decisions involved in producing a good discussion case. The order is not sacrosanct, and some case-writers use a different sequence. We believe that all the steps need to be covered, however, and the sequence presented reflects one logical way of approaching the process.

1. **Topic Choice.** The criteria for choosing the topic of a discussion case may be somewhat different from those used to identify an issue for OAL. Ideally a teaching case will focus attention on issues that are relevant to many individuals and organizations. It is much easier to develop a case when the case-writers have a good idea of some of the major issues to be discussed by participants. Ideally case-writers will be able to articulate the major lessons for discussion participants to learn before they start writing, though specific lessons may have to await more detailed knowledge of the case.

2. **Negotiate Agreement with the Organization**. Organization members are often nervous about case-writing on controversial issues, since weaknesses may become apparent in case descriptions. While some organizations may not be willing to participate, others may be happy to be recognized as an organization that pays explicit attention to action learning and organizational improvement. In any case, it is important to come to agreement with organizations about matters such as:

   a. How will information be used? Will individuals be identified to the public? to their bosses?
   b. To what extent will (can) the organization be disguised?
   c. How will the organization get to review cases prior to publication, and what influence can they have over the production of specific materials?

3. **Data Collection.** Understanding the issues requires an initial collection of information from people inside and outside the organization familiar with the details of the case. Methods of data collection include:

   a. In-depth interviews with people who were or are involved in the issues. How did they see events evolving? What were their reactions and thoughts at the time?

b. Interviews with people who had a larger perspective on events, such as organizational leaders or external observers. What larger forces shaped the context in which actors made their decisions?
c. Examining organizational records and other "paper trails" that help reconstruct the unfolding of events.

Different methods may be appropriate to different cases. It is important to pay attention to the presence of multiple perspectives, through varied perceptions of organizational leaders, organizational staff, donors, or clients of the agency. The understanding of the issue will evolve as more information and perspectives become available.

It is not always easy for people to speak frankly about different perspectives on an issue, particularly if they differ from the views of higher-status, higher-power actors. It will be important for case-writers to ensure confidentiality or safety if they are going to understand all the relevant perspectives.

4. **Case Outline.** Outline the case in the form of a story. An effective discussion case presents an interesting story with a clear "decision point," challenging readers to grapple with the major issues of the case in the form of a concrete decision. Therefore, your outline should include:

a. background information the reader will need to analyze the situation and draw sensible conclusions about appropriate decisions or actions.
b. the important events in the story.
c. important characteristics, personal and organizational, of the decision-maker and other important actors.
d. the "decision point" or action dilemma that poses the central problem of the case to the reader.

5. **First Draft.** Write the case from the outline. Consider alternate ways to tell the story: various designs for structuring the case around the decision.

a. Some cases present the decision point in the first paragraph, and proceed with the background and unfolding of the story that led to that point.
b. Other cases tell a gripping personal story, from one protagonist's point of view. This person faces a concrete decision at the end of the case that the reader is invited to consider.
c. Development organizations often face issues involving multiple perspectives, and an effective decision case can present each of these perspectives in turn before posing the final problem. The more these perspectives are personalized in individual actors, the more compelling the case.

Case-writers will learn more about the issue at hand with each reconsideration of the story. They can in subsequent drafts sharpen the story, learn new lessons, integrate those lessons into the case, and so on. This process embodies the action learning cycle as applied to case-writing.

6. **Case Review.** Ask internal people to review the case. It is important to think strategically about this; for instance, should the Executive Director be the first to read the first draft? Or should others in the organization review it for accuracy and possible "land mines" first? The more sensitive the topic of the case, the more thoughtful the team needs to be in how it is shared and with whom. The main criteria for review will include accuracy, clarity, and whether it could be hurtful to anyone. Feedback from the organization can be used in successive revisions.

7. **Facilitators' Note.** Compile a "Facilitators' Note" to guide others who might want to facilitate case discussions using this case. Basically, the note should outline your understanding of the issues and how you think the case might be used to stimulate learning about the topics you intended to illuminate. Elements of the Note might include:

   a. A basic analysis of the major issues involved in the case, preferably offering multiple interpretations or views of the issues.
   b. Learning goals for the participants. What lessons you think participants should take away from the case discussion?
   c. Strategies for diagnosis. Ideas about how readers should analyze the case, how facilitators can get people to share their analysis of the case, the decision it presents, and the solutions or decisions that they recommend. Suggest specific questions to guide the discussion.
   d. Ideas for structuring the learning process. Is the case best analyzed in small groups organized to answer a few key questions; by assigning teams to take different perspectives (e.g. organizational leaders, staff, clients, donors); or in the classic large-group facilitated discussion? Given that the case method does not assume "right answers" to be discovered, how can the discussion be structured to encourage a full exploration of conditions leading to an organizational decision point as well as the ramifications of possible responses?

8. **Pilot Test.** Teach the case to a group of "outsiders" who can give you useful feedback for further improvement. You might want to teach the case to the kind of audience for whom it was designed, and see if it leads to the kind of discussion you planned. Alternatively, you can identify friends or colleagues with extensive related experience and ask for their honest reactions to all aspects of the case. The feedback from such groups can be very helpful in revising the case and the Facilitator's Note.

9. **Permission.** Get written permission from the organization to use the case publicly. It may be appropriate in some cases to disguise the organization by changing names and details that are not critical to

case issues; in other cases, organizations may recognize that it is to their credit that they have learned from experience and it will enhance their reputation to be identified in the case.

10. **Supplementary Materials.** Consider whether the case could be supplemented with other learning materials to offer a more complete and powerful learning experience. Supplementary materials might include:

    a. Notes and articles on key issues raised by the case that provide conceptual frameworks, experience from other settings, and varieties of action strategies.
    b. Experiential exercises, such as simulations or role plays that call on participants to take action in "real-time" situations and build interpersonal and leadership skills as well as analytic capacities.
    c. Video or dramatic presentations that will enable exploring the issues in a different mode and in different settings.

C. FACILITATING A CASE DISCUSSION

In a case study discussion, learning is the outcome of the facilitator and the participants grappling with a real-world problem together. Both bring unique experiences and perspectives to the conversation, and the goal is to allow both to contribute and to learn. Discussion cases may be employed in a variety of ways for the benefit of NGOs and NGO staff. Effective case discussions provide intense and sometimes transformational learning experiences, and their use can benefit NGOs and the NGO sector on several levels. The best cases refuse to reveal a "right answer;" the most fruitful learning often emerges from genuine debate. The case should pose a clear dilemma or decision to the reader, and will be most effective if it conveys a sense of urgency about the dilemma.

One metaphor for the process of analysis that occurs in a case discussion is that of peeling an onion, with more and more layers of new perspectives and insights emerging along the way. During the case discussion, the facilitator's primary task is to draw out and clarify specific themes in the case around which learning can take place. However, "planning" a case discussion is a necessary but paradoxical process in that it is likely to be quickly amended by developments in the discussion. Several alternate designs for the discussion are available to the facilitator, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Depending on the nature of the group and its reason for convening, the facilitator may use a case to feature a set of special concerns relevant to NGOs, such as sustainability or diversity. Similarly, in a relatively theoretical group, the facilitator may choose to use the case as a springboard for a more abstract discussion of development principles. In addition, a wise facilitator will attend closely to the themes that participants introduce, as a way to recognize emerging issues in the group and, over time, in the larger sector. Facilitation of a case discussion differs from facilitation of a meeting in that a case discussion is not a content-free process. Typically, a case discussion proceeds through a set of roughly identifiable stages: reading, review, diagnosis, prescription, summary, and application.

Action learning (AL) involves a continuing cycle of four elements (experience, reflection, learning, and action) which recur in what may be an upward spiral of increasing sophistication, or a self-fulfilling cycle of repetitive action, or a downward spiral of decreasing understanding and less effective action. Case discussions are maximized by establishment of a supportive atmosphere. By providing access to many more "experiences" -- that is, detailed case descriptions of raw experience with minimal interpretation of those experiences-- participants can multiply their learning opportunities without having to live through all of them first-hand.

I. DISCUSSION CASES AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Most classroom instruction is based on the model of deductive learning: general theories are presented, which the student is then expected to apply to specific situations. Experiential education, on the other hand, relies on the model of inductive learning: provided with a concrete experience or set of specific data, students are invited to induce general principles. Quite different learning experiences will result from these two models, and individuals tend to prefer one or the other. Much adult education is based on the inductive model, which seeks to ground theories in examples from life experience.

Similarly, student-centered learning represents a departure from the usual passive transfer of knowledge, as described, for instance, in Freire's "banking model" of learning. In the "banking" approach, education is defined as a teacher "depositing" units of knowledge in a student's brain, usually in the form of rote memorization, and the teacher should then be able to return to the bank at any point to "withdraw" that knowledge verbatim. In this model, classroom interaction typically consists of teachers lecturing at their students in order to transfer some portion of what they know.

The case study method, which is both inductive and student-centered, assumes that the development of insights and good judgement cannot be transferred through the banking model. In case discussions, the teacher and students learn together as the discussion unfolds, and students often contribute observations based in their experiences that the teacher could not have provided. In this way the co-generation of learning challenges traditional power roles in the classroom. Therefore we will refer here not to students but to participants, and not to teachers but to facilitators.

In the case study discussion, then, learning is the outcome of the facilitator and participants grappling with a real-world problem together. Both bring unique experiences and perspectives to the conversation, and the goal is to allow both to contribute and learn. Instructors who are accustomed to wielding tight control in their classrooms will find this to be an unpredictable experience, but an effective case discussion can result in new and unexpected lessons for everyone involved.

II. THE USE OF DISCUSSION CASES BY NGOS

Nongovernmental development organizations (NGOs) may be described along several dimensions. For the purposes of this discussion, the following characteristics of NGOs emerge as particularly relevant: a strong ideological or values-based orientation; belief in the value of broad participation in societal decision-making; the desire or necessity to serve multiple interest groups or constituencies; a high-level of dependance on organizations or forces outside the NGO; and an interpersonal culture that emphasizes cooperation.

Discussion cases may be employed in a variety of ways for the benefit of NGOs and NGO staff. For instance, support organizations can use them in their developmental work with NGOs; consultants and trainers can use them in organizational interventions; college and university teachers can use them to teach about NGOs in their courses. Regional NGO networks can use discussion cases to build a shared base of knowledge for their working relationship, and "live cases" can be organized with the featured players in a case, to discuss a situation in their own NGO.

Effective case discussions provide intense and sometimes transformational learning experiences, and their use can benefit NGOs and the NGO sector on several levels. First, they can contribute to the development of individual staff members and leaders when as discussion participants they have the opportunity to exchange views on an organizational dilemma, examine those views from several perspectives, and thereby examine the effectiveness of their own approaches. We all make many decisions by intuition, and case discussions offer a means for making explicit our underlying assumptions and comparing them with those of others.

Second, NGOs can benefit as organizations when a group of staff participate in a discussion case and explicitly relate the issues in the case to a situation in their own organization. This can be built into the design of the case discussion. (In a related process, NGOs can also learn a great deal from researching and writing cases about their own experiences in order to reflect on that experience more fully and draw lessons from it they would not otherwise have identified.)

Third, NGOs frequently experience high turnover among staff, who typically move among related organizations but stay within the sector for an extended period. Discussion cases can provide a common base of sectoral learning if they enable key players in the sector to reflect together on common issues. A similar dynamic holds for joint learning within networks and coalitions.

An important goal for using discussion cases is to move participants beyond what they already know-- that is, the opinions and perspectives they bring to the discussion. New learning is most likely to result under conditions that allow participants to engage with and learn not only from the facilitator, but also from each other. In other words, in a successful case discussion much of the dialogue happens between participants rather than each participant responding directly to the facilitator. Learning is multiplied many times over when the experiences and knowledge of everyone in the room are available to be drawn on.

The best cases refuse to reveal a "right answer;" the most fruitful learning often emerges from genuine debate. Discussion cases serve as exceptionally effective tools for getting people to grapple with ambiguity in the kind of messy, real-life situations where "right answers" are usually misleading. And because the facilitator is not the keeper of the truth, he often learns as much from the discussion as the participants. The facilitator may have information about how the case "turned out" in life, and may or may not choose to share it with the participants, but it doesn't make the historical outcome right or wrong. In fact, it may be helpful for the facilitator to

Example: One NGO decided to write a case about an organizational problem whose true nature they had come to understand only gradually. The first installment of the story, the "A" Case, described the situation from their initial point of view, when they suspected the problem related to the belittling of a fieldworker due to her gender and youth. The "A" Case would be read and discussed from this perspective. However, upon reading the "B" Case, participants would belatedly discover that gender and age tensions had in fact distracted them from fundamental mismanagement and financial improprieties in the entire field organization. Therefore the structure of the case reflected the process of the NGO belatedly piecing it together, and the participants' experience of the case reflected the learning process of the NGO staff who experienced and wrote it.

point out that a particular strategy may work for some people but not for others even in the same situation.

One metaphor for the process of analysis that occurs in a case discussion is that of peeling an onion, with more and more layers of new perspectives and insights emerging along the way. Sometimes this process is built into a discussion when the case is structured in multiple installments, which are read and discussed by the group one at a time before going on to the next.

III. THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

A case discussion can provide a learning experience in which participants and facilitators are able to reflect on their own experiences and those of others. This is achieved in a unique format which may differ from their previous learning experiences, and requires more and different preparation than participants may have done in the past. Therefore, before the case discussion it will be helpful to prepare participants for expectations of them in this new process.

Participants should have access to the case far enough in advance to be able to read it and prepare responses to the study questions provided. In fact, they should be advised to read it carefully several times because the discussion is likely to go into great detail. They should know that the case will present them with quite a bit of information but not many conclusions, and that they will be asked to make several judgements about it independantly and with others.

The case should pose a clear dilemma or decision to the reader, and will be most effective if it conveys a sense of urgency about the dilemma. It should assign responsibility for a decision and subsequent action to a specific character or set of characters (such as the fieldworker or the project manager), rather than allowing for vague statements of general advice.

In their reading and case preparation, participants will take the first steps toward peeling the onion by developing their own ideas about the situation in the case. They should consider causes as well as symptoms of the problem, and how the decision-maker might get additional information, if it is needed. The study questions should direct the reader to these kinds of considerations, and most importantly, to make a decision about action steps to be taken: for example, "Now, what should the Finance Director do?" The most compelling cases put the reader into the shoes of the central character so convincingly that one can begin to feel the pressures and conflicts inherent in that position.

When participants come to the discussion having thought about the central dilemmas of the case, they are likely to be surprised at how differently some other participants view the same circumstances. It is in exploring this difference of perspectives that the energy and value of the case discussion emerges, for individuals will be encouraged to expand on and support their own views while considering carefully the contributions and objections of others. A well-facilitated case discussion will enable the group to develop an analysis stronger than that of any single individual because it draws on the strengths of everyone present.

However, this requires patience, a willingness to listen and to be challenged, and the ability to openly and comfortably deal with conflict. Highly ideological NGOs may stifle healthy disagreement in the interest of unity, and the use of discussion cases will challenge the tacit agreement not to disagree. Participants may appreciate a brief discussion about the expectations for openness and candor in case discussions, if they are not accustomed to it.

Dilemmas described in cases about NGOs will often remind the reader of something in his or her own experience; indeed, connections between the case and one's own experiences is what makes this an experiential learning tool. However, initially the case discussion should be limited to the specific dilemma at hand in order to provide all participants with a common focus. This common focus will, in turn, provide the opportunity to examine and compare the assumptions and intuitions they bring from their varied backgrounds and experiences. And the facilitator may, toward the end of the discussion, ask they apply lessons from the case to current issues facing them in their work. Next we will consider this and the many other decisions the facilitator makes in planning a case discussion.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

A. PREPARATION FOR THE DISCUSSION

1. The Task of the Facilitator

During the case discussion the facilitator's primary task is to draw out and clarify specific themes in the case around which learning can take place. Therefore the fundamental question for the facilitator to ask herself is "What do I want the participants to learn from the discussion?" A facilitator who has articulated learning goals will be more successful in maintaining a direction for the group, even during a wide-ranging discussion.

Before the discussion the facilitator prepares discussion questions that expand on the study questions posed at the end of the case. And it remains the task of the facilitator to present a clear dilemma or decision point o the participants; this is especially true if he has decided to use a traditional, descriptive case study, which typically is not written to pose a clear dilemma.

The facilitator's preparation will therefore include identification of the major issues in the case, as well as the learning needs of the particular participants. She may also want to anticipate likely positions participants may take as well as general issues likely to emerge in the group. The facilitator will then develop open-ended questions to pose. ("As the executive director in this case, what will you do?") During the course of the discussion the facilitator will continue to utilize open-ended questions. ("Anna, do you agree with Mzwai? Why or why not?")

The interest of participants will be maximized if the questions posed are provocative, exciting, and controversial. If the discussion is generating little disagreement, the facilitator may want to play "devil's advocate" and invite participants to do so as well. Rigorous thinking requires resisting rigid organizational, sectorial, or political ideologies.

However, planning a case discussion is a necessary but paradoxical process in that it is likely to be quickly amended by developments in the discussion. In fact, some of the most exciting directions will emerge from the facilitator's willingness to follow a new line of inquiry suggested by a participant, even as he remains focused on how it fits in the discussion plan, or whether to disregard the plan entirely. Therefore a rigorous yet flexible stance will be required, with a simultaneously "loose-tight" control of the flow of the discussion.

The facilitator's plan for the discussion will also include actions to establish a learning atmosphere that does not promote competition, even as it values rigorous inquiry. Because of the typical educational socialization process, intellectual rigor sometimes becomes confused with interpersonal competition. By explicitly acknowledging this tendency at the start, the facilitator can play an important role in establishing a more supportive learning environment.

With practice, the facilitator will also develop an individual style for conducting case discussions, and her preparation will reflect that style. The facilitator who knows the discussion participants will also be able to tailor questions to their experience, challenge their biases, and plan specifically for their learning needs.

The facilitator will also need to construct a timeline for the discussion, estimating the amount of time to be spent on each phase; actual experience will inevitably vary, but a discussion without a plan can get hopelessly lost. The most common reasons for departure from the plan include a theme taking longer to discuss than anticipated, not emerging at all, or appearing earlier or later in the discussion than expected. However, it helps to have an idea of where one hopes to go, even if one never arrives, or arrives by a different route.

2. Discussion Formats and other Facilitation Tools

Several alternate designs for the discussion are available to the facilitator, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Below we review some of the major options and briefly discuss each.

Conduct the entire discussion in one large group. This is the traditional case discussion format, and it is useful for small groups or for groups that want to hear everything said by all participants. If the discussion includes a brainstorming session on some aspect of the case, a rich potpourri of ideas can emerge from having everyone involved. Disadvantages of the large group format include: a) everyone gets less opportunity to talk, and b) the size of the group sometimes intimidates shy speakers. In a long conference or a long day, lack of variation in discussion formats can contribute to boredom among participants as well as facilitators.

Break into small groups for the first part of the discussion, then bring everyone together. Small groups need to have limited, answerable questions posed to them rather than being vaguely charged to "figure out" the case. The small group setting will give individuals the opportunity to develop their own perspectives in conversation with a limited number of others, and identify themes important to bring to the larger group. When the large group reconvenes, the small groups will each report on their findings or discussion and the facilitator will proceed to weave these into a plenary discussion of the "burning issues" of the case.

Advantages of this approach include providing individuals with more opportunity to discuss their perspectives in a smaller and presumably safer group. As a result, a richer variety of perspectives can sometimes emerge when some of the preparatory work has been done in small groups. (Many programs that make heavy use of the case method recommend that students form small, extracurricular study groups for these reasons.) The major disadvantages of small group work relate to the extra time it requires, and its de-emphasis on establishing a large group identity.

If time permits, participants can split off into their small groups a second time to process the large group discussion. They could be asked questions such as, "What did you learn from the case?" and, if they all work in the same organization, "How can we apply these lessons to our own work?" This is especially helpful if one goal is to emphasize small group work or organizational learning.

A debate. If it can be predicted that the case discussion is likely to boil down to two or three distinct, opposing views, a debate format can be an interesting way to highlight the differences. Again, the facilitator may want to preface the debate with a few words about the unhelpful nature of competition; similarly, in a group that shies away from conflict a debate format may provide permission to engage in constructive but open conflict. One drawback of a debate is that it can crystallize positions as unrealistically distinct and unresponsive to creative combinations. The debate format often motivates thorough preparation by the participants, in order to avoid being embarrassed by a lack of familiarity with the material.

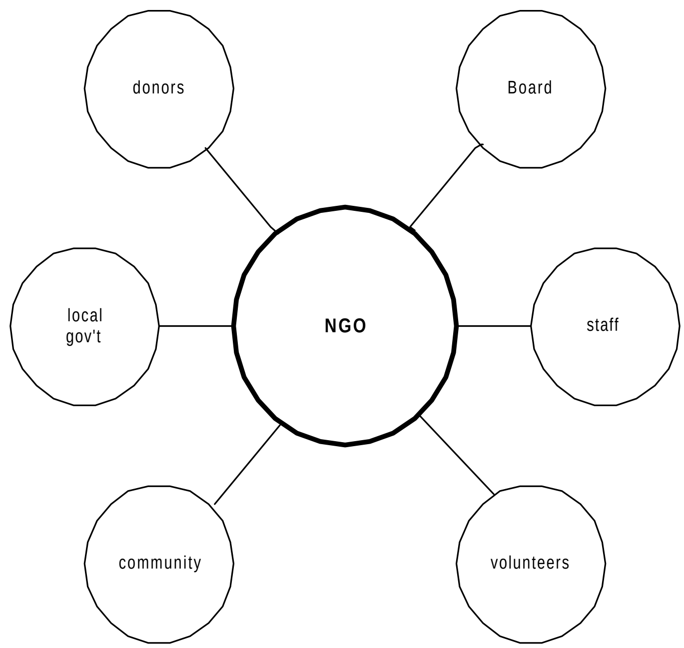
A role play or simulation. Assigning specific roles to individuals encourages broad and eager participation in a case; however, the facilitator should be aware of exactly what she hopes to accomplish with this design. A role play successfully places the participant in the shoes of a character in the case, and creates close identification with that character, but it can similarly limit the ability of participants to ultimately take a larger view of the dilemma.

> **Example:** The use of a role play in one case discussion involved assigning discussion participants roles in a meeting between NGO staff and community members. The central dilemma of the case was "How should the staff prepare for the upcoming community meeting?"; the underlying question, as usual, was "What should the NGO do?"

A simulation, then, engenders a high level of participation as well as identification with the characters of the case. Any simulated activity, however, requires extensive planning in order to successfully stimulate the experience desired by the facilitator. Simulations and role plays also require sufficient amounts of debriefing time to process the experience, rather than simply reproduce it and abandon participants to draw their own meanings.

If the goal of the simulation or role play is to reproduce a difficult or painful experience so that participants may analyze and learn from it, the facilitator needs to be careful not to thoughtlessly reproduce experiences of oppression in targeted populations. For example, an exercise designed to simulate racism or sexism will not be helpful if it reenacts the daily experiences of women or people of color among the participants. In such a case, assigning reversed roles can be more educational, or designing simulations that less literally replay oppressive social dynamics (i.e., segregation by eye color rather than skin color). In these exercises it is crucial to provide plenty of debriefing and processing time in order to vent and deal with the strong feelings that emerge. It can also be helpful to assign some participants to play the role of observers, in order to ensure the presence of a perspective not identified with any single character.

Besides choosing a discussion format, the facilitator will also decide whether to use visual aids such as newsprint or a blackboard. Visual aids prepared in advance are a little risky because the discussion may not proceed in a direction that makes them relevant, and because they introduce an element of control by the facilitator that may inhibit the discussion. However, the facilitator will typically have some ideas in mind that he plans to use during the case discussion. These might include use of a stakeholder diagram, for example, to depict an NGO's key constituencies, such as the following:



If one of the problems in the case is a lack of communication with an important constituency, this diagram can help identify where the breakdown occurs.

Another tool involves constructing a budget together for a project or organization in which the management of resources is an important issue. Is this an organization on the verge of bankruptcy? Does the structure of the funding agreement encourage donor dependancy? Of course, the decision to use or construct financial statements for a case discussion will also depend on the background and interests of the participants.

The facilitator may suggest constructing a timeline to highlight the evolution of issues, or an organizational chart to highlight Board-staff relations. The facilitator will undoubtedly be able to think of several other ways to visually depict the salient issues of a case.

3. Featuring Special Aspects of the Case

Depending on the nature of the group and its reason for convening, the facilitator may use a case to feature a set of special concerns relevant to NGOs, such as sustainability or diversity. In this situation the facilitator first identifies and analyzes the appearance of these issues in the case, whether explicitly of implicitly, and prepares questions to bring these issues into relief. The facilitator will also closely follow up on any participant who addresses such concerns in his case discussion, asking some basic questions in the preparation process will reveal the dynamics of a case. Start by noting the gender, race, or ethnic or religious identity of the various characters: Is any important group left out or dramatically underrepresented? Is power disproportionately distributed, or does any group have limited opportunities for participation? Is any group assigned a stereotypical role? Are assumptions or generalizations being made about all the characters based on the experience of one group?

Once the facilitator has identified some issues to explore, she can focus on these in the case discussion with the following kinds of questions for participants: What is the gender (race, pr religious or ethnic affiliation) of each character? Does this have an impact on the situation? Could such differences merely be a "smoke screen" for another issue? How does culture influence the events of this case?

It has been noted that in a role play the facilitator can assign non-traditional roles to the participants, such as asking a woman to play a tribal chief or a man to play an NGO staff member advocating for child care. In small group work, members of minority or low-power groups will find it helpful not to be isolated as the "only one" in a small group. It will be more supportive if facilitators arrange to have at least two members of such groups in any small group, or none at all. In general, the facilitator will want to remain thoughtful about drawing on highly charged identities (such as splitting the large group by gender for some portion of the discussion) because it can easily promote polarization. Breaking down into "identity groups" is most useful for exercises that seek to generate experience-based data for subsequent use in intergroup dialogues.

Similarly, in a relatively theoretical group, the facilitator may choose to use the case as a springboard for a more abstract discussion of development principles. For instance, after posing the standard "What should the NGO do?" question, the facilitator can follow up on responses with the query, "Which principles of development underlie your proposal?"

Example: One case discussion among particularly sophisticated participants evolved into a discussion of two conflicting development principles beneath the conflict in the case: "the community is always right" vs. "Protect the integrity of the organization at all costs." Bringing this conflict into clearer relief enabled the group to generalize their learning from the specific circumstances of the case.

4. Recognizing Emerging Issues

Although a case discussion has a greater probability of success if the facilitator has carefully prepared, he will face opportunities for departure from the plan at every stage in the discussion. Whether to pursue the original plan or follow the emerging interest of the group will be a judgement to make over and over, and will somewhat depend on the facilitator's style. However, a case discussion can perform the valuable function of an "ink blot" test because participants are bound to project their own interests on the material. Therefore a wise facilitator will attend closely to the themes that participants introduce, as a way to recognize emerging issues in the group. The prospective revelation of participant interests makes mastery of a simultaneously "loose-tight" facilitative stance even more rewarding: in this approach, the discussion is tightly planned but the facilitator remains loose about amending the plan to follow more exciting directions that emerge.

The facilitator can also take a "loose-tight" approach to decisions of process during the case discussion. For instance, if the facilitator is at some point unsure of how to proceed, she can ask the participants what they think the group should do, as in "Would you rather discuss this part of the case in small groups, or together in a large group?" This can be particularly helpful with participants experienced in the case method who are also sensitive to interpersonal dynamics. This approach is compatible with the participatory style of many NGO cultures, although deeding too many decisions to participate can make their learning experience less interesting when too much time is spent on process.

B. FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

Facilitation of a case discussion differs from facilitation of a meeting in that a case discussion is not a content-free process. In fact, in this format it is the facilitator's responsibility to highlight the contents of the case, raise alternative perspectives, and lead the effort to peel the onion by encouraging participants to consider new issues or perspectives not included in their original analysis. And as noted above, it is also the facilitator's role to create a safe climate for rigorous joint inquiry that enables the group to challenge sacred assumptions.

Typically, it is helpful to proceed through the following roughly identifiable stages in a case discussion:

Participants read the case. If they haven't received a copy in advance, or not everyone has read it, take ten or fifteen minutes out of the allotted time to allow everyone to catch up.

Review the basics. It is often helpful to review the outlines of the situation, so that everyone starts with a similar understanding of the events of the case; one is inevitably surprised by the different scenarios conjured by different readers from the same material. Throughout the discussion, the facilitator will frequently direct the attention of the group back to the case in order to answer factual questions, or test emerging interpretations against the available data.

Diagnose the problem. The facilitator may want to informally canvass the room for a variety of perspectives on the nature of the problem; alternately, he may request that one participant presents her position in depth, and then invite others to comment on it. Of course, in such a case the facilitator will choose the featured speaker carefully for she will have to withstand group scrutiny.

It can also be helpful to ask at this point whether the participants would want any additional information not included in the case in order to make a more accurate diagnosis; they should also consider how they would acquire this information, were they characters in the case. In any case, the facilitator may want to point out that we all make many decisions every day without complete information.

Develop a prescription for behavior. Once the group has discussed the nature of the problem, the facilitator will invite participants to empathize with specific, varying characters and take a position: what should he or she or they do? The most compelling discussion will center on a concrete decision or multiple decisions that someone, or some group, needs to make. For group or organizational decisions, the facilitator will press participants to detail who exactly should carry them out. Participants should always personalize their recommendations, and this can be especially interesting if participants are at ideological odds with the characters in the case. This development of prescriptive positions by the participants, with rigorous questioning by the facilitator, comprises the heart of the case discussion and should have the greatest amount of time devoted to it.

Summarize the issues. The facilitator will often set aside the last ten minutes of a case discussion to summarize, or ask the participants to summarize, the most important issues in the case. He may or may not want to list these in written form. It is important to stress that this is merely a summary of major themes, and not a lecture on the "right answers." As noted above and depending on the audience, the facilitator may lead a discussion on the development principles underlying the issues of the case. The level of abstraction of this discussion will depend on the needs, interests, and abilities of the participants and facilitator.

At this time the facilitator may want to share with the group why the case was chosen, and what she hoped would be learned from it, and ask participants what was actually learned from it. It can also be interesting for the facilitator to report on what she learned from the discussion. For instance, one lesson commonly reported from a rigorous case discussion involves the importance of distinguishing superfluous from critical information.

Share the outcome (optional). If the facilitator happens to know how the case actually turned out, and what the organization or main character actually did, he may want to share that with the participants. Again, it should be noted that the participants will be tempted to interpret the actual decision made by the NGO as the "right" one, and judge themselves according to who got it "right." This tendency can be balanced by questions such as, "What would have happened is she had taken another route?" or "What would have happened if he had done nothing at all?" The goal is to avoid interpreting the actual outcome as an inevitability.

Apply lessons from the case to the participants' own experience (optional). The facilitator may choose to emphasize concrete applications of the participants' learning in the case discussion, as one step in the action learning process described below. The facilitator will ask questions such as "Have you had any concrete experiences like this?" Depending on the group, it may be appropriate either for participants to consider their own experience as individuals, or for groups of participants from the same organization to reflect together on how lessons from the case apply to their shared situation.

Variations on the above stages of a case discussion are pursued in response to need and circumstance. For instance, some cases are written as a series, with subsequent plot developments briefly described in a "B" case, and sometimes a "C" case, "D" case, etc. These are typically presented by distributing the first installment (the "A" case) in advance of the discussion along with appropriate study questions. The facilitator first leads a discussion, including diagnosis and prescription, on the basis of the information contained only in this first installment. Next, rather than turning to a discussion of major themes, the facilitator distributes copies of the next installment in the saga (the "B" case) and asks participants to read it. A discussion then ensues based on the new developments and new information, asking questions such as "How has the situation changed?" and "Now what should he do?" Any subsequent installments are distributed and discussed the same way.

In such a discussion, the facilitator must carefully pace the conversation, and the later case installments need to be short enough to enable everyone to read them. Discussing a series of cases can provide an exciting learning experience because often the "B" case will demonstrate for participants the consequences of pursuing one of the specific paths they prescribed after reading the "A" case. If this prescription proves to have been unsuccessful as indicated by the developments in the "B" case, some participants may feel they had advocated for the "wrong" answer. The facilitator can counter this by leading a rigorous analysis of all that can be learned from the unfolding events of the case, noting that unintended consequences can emerge from any course of action.

Regardless of the structure, it is important to remember that facilitators are responsible for managing the process of the discussion as well as the content, and will be served by attending to patterns of participation. For instance, the attentive facilitator will instinctively not who participates most and least frequently, and take steps to correct imbalances. Are members of high-power groups dominating the conversation, by speaking at great length or interrupting others? A skilled facilitator can integrate reticent participants into the flow of the discussion and gently interrupt patterns of interruption.

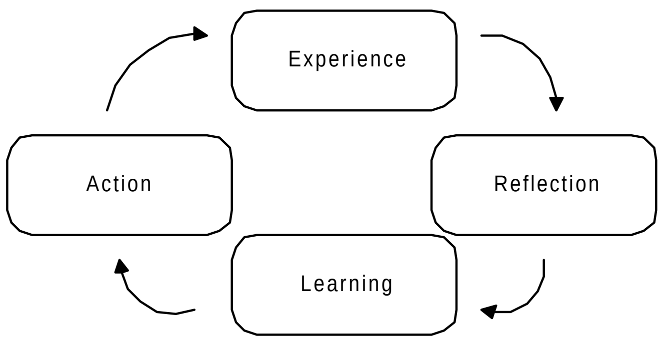
A self-aware facilitator is also familiar with his or her own potential biases; for instance, research has been shown that schoolteachers in mixed classrooms in many areas of the world listen more attentively and at greater length to boys than girls. If such biases are demonstrated by the facilitator, excluded participants will consciously or unconsciously respond by disrupting or withdrawing from the case discussion. For the ongoing development of one's skills, it is always helpful for a facilitator, teacher, or any other kind of group leader to periodically ask a trusted colleague to observe him or her in action and offer feedback on what is observed.

V. DISCUSSION CASES IN ACTION LEARNING

A. THE ACTION LEARNING CYCLE

Action learning (AL) involves a continuing cycle of four elements represented in Figure 1. These elements recur in what may be an upward spiral of increasing sophistication, or a self-fulfilling cycle of repetitive action, or a downward spiral of decreasing understanding and less effective action. AL in the most general sense refers to a variety of approaches to learning from experience, including action research, participatory research, organizational learning and several other traditions.[2]

FIGURE 1 : THE ACTION LEARNING CYCLE



Activities to improve action learning processes can emphasize any element of the cycle: experience may be apprehended in deeper and more sensitive ways; reflection may explore richer and wider possibilities; learning may build more sophisticated and generalizable concepts and hypotheses; action may be expressed in more integrated and differentiated skills.

<u>Individual</u> action learning (IAL) can be carried out by an individual who is willing to reflect on his or her experience, develop new concepts or frameworks to explain that experience, and undertake new strategies and actions in response to that learning. <u>Organizational</u> action learning (OAL) requires carrying out the processes of reflection, learning, action, and experience at an organizational level, building new capacities for understanding and action into the organization as well as its members.

The discussion below provides some preliminary ideas about the role of case discussions in fostering action learning. As practitioners and scholars develop a fuller understanding of the action learning process, we will be able to sharpen our understanding of the tools that most successfully foster it. The authors look forward to learning more about action learning experiences with the case discussion tool from our colleagues in the NGO community.

B. ACTION LEARNING OUTCOMES OF A CASE DISCUSSION

Case discussions contribute to the reflection and learning stages in the action learning cycle depicted above. Interestingly, however, a case provides the opportunity to discuss and reflect on an experience other than one's own. Because experiential learning models typically assume the learner is reflecting on and learning from her own experience, the idea of learning from another person's or another organization's experience departs from this assumption.

However, there are at least two aspects of participation in a case discussion that can influence one's own action learning. The first assumes that a rigorous case discussion models a group reflection process for participants, encouraging the careful analysis of experience (and the analytical testing of intuitive hunches) before making a decision or taking the next action step. In academic programs that heavily utilize the case study method, it is considered a reliable methodology for educating practitioners in the exercise of good judgement.[3]

In this view, the content of the case may or may not be directly applicable to one's own experience, but the experience of rigorous analysis is assumed to transfer to any number of situations. However, it should be noted that if the organization described in the case is completely unfamiliar or uninteresting to participants, their motivation to participate may be adversely affected.

The second aspect of action learning through case discussions adds a focus on the content of the case study. Does the case describe the kind of organizations participants work in? Does it describe the kinds of issues they have faced in the past, or are likely to face in the future? In other words, will participants be able to see clear parallels to their own experience in the case? The completion of the action learning cycle in this instance will be indicated when discussion participants return to their organizations and change their behavior due to lessons learned from the case. This possibility may be highlighted by specific questions from the facilitator such as "Do you plan to change your actions in your NGO, considering lessons you have drawn from this case?"

Similarly, if more than one member of an NGO is participating in a case discussion, they may find it particularly helpful to progress through the action learning cycle together. They can be provided the opportunity to consider in a small group their response to the question, "What do you plan to bring back to your organization from this discussion?" They may want to reflect on this at an organizational level, perhaps with the assistance of a facilitator.

Occasionally, an NGO will establish a task force to research and write a case study about a specific experience in their organization. In this exercise they will have an opportunity to complete the action learning cycle by reflecting on, learning from, and changing behavior in response to their own experience. They can draw additional lessons from the case by presenting it to another group and benefitting from the observations and reactions of others who work in the same sector.

These case discussions can be attended by, and sometimes facilitated by, members of the casewriting team, but to be most effective they need to be carefully planned with regard to division of roles and responsibilities. It can still be helpful to have one outside facilitator who assists with tasks such as the pacing of the discussion, etc.

Example: In one case discussion, participants identified repeated destructive patterns in organizational governance in the NGO that was the subject of the case. Because members of the casewriting team attended this discussion to help present the case, they were able to formulate a plan for sharing this insight with the rest of the organization in order to finally develop an alternative organizational behavior.

Whoever facilitates the case discussion, it bears repeating that the possibilities for action learning are maximized by a supportive learning atmosphere. Conditions for learning include the presence of interpersonal trust, standards of analytical rigor, and expectations of ideological flexibility.

A case discussion can be helpful in facilitating the reflection and learning stages of the action learning cycle, even when the experience under discussion is not one's own, and it can be extended to include one's own experience by inviting explicit comparisons. By providing access to many more "experiences" -- that is, detailed case descriptions of raw experience with minimal interpretation of those experiences -- participants can multiply their learning opportunities without having to live through all of them first-hand. This accelerated experiential learning benefits individual participants, their organizations, and the NGO sector as a whole.

A final note: The authors welcome feedback, additions, or questions about these notes. IDR is committed to strengthening grassroots organizations and institutions around the world, and invites communications exploring this and other means to that end.

ADDITIONAL READING

Christiansen, Garvin, and Sweet, editors. Education for Judgement: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1991.

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Gragg, Charles I. "Because Wisdom Can't Be Told," Harvard Alumni Bulletin. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1940.

Leach, Mark. "Building Capacity Through Action Learning." Boston, Massachusetts: Institute for Development Research, 1993.

ENDNOTES

1. This section draws heavily on a review of the various literatures related to action learning supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. See Mark Leach, "Building Capacity Through Action Learning," Boston, MA: Institute for Development Research, 1993.

2. This section draws heavily on Leach (1993).

3. For instance, see Christiansen, Garvin, and Sweet (1991).