

**STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL  
COMMUNICATION  
INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**  
*Seventh Edition*

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# USING THE CASE STUDIES IN *STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION*

BY CHARLES CONRAD

Recent surveys of organizational communication instructors have provided compelling evidence of the difficulty of our task. These surveys indicate that the two greatest problems we face are (1) covering within a single semester the wide range of topics that make up the area of study and (2) coping with the varied levels of organizational experience of our students. These challenges create a fundamental dilemma: the most efficient way to cover a wide range of ideas is through a lecture format that minimizes student involvement and limits student-teacher interaction, **but** the most effective way to compensate for limited organizational experience of some students and/or capitalize on the extensive experience of others is to involve them in field work or extended organizational simulations in the classroom. Because both of the latter options demand extensive time and energy; they severely limit the range of topics that can be covered during a course. One way to deal with this dilemma is to incorporate case studies into a course that is conducted in a lecture-discussion format. In addition, case analysis provides the opportunities for interpersonal interaction and critical thinking skill development that communication instructors generally prefer. But successful use of organizational cases is a difficult task, as many of the participants of surveys of teaching strategies have indicated. In addition, many of the instructors who have used *Strategic Organizational Communication* in the past have asked for guidelines for using organizational cases.

## PREPARING FOR CASE DISCUSSION

The first step in preparing to discuss cases is for instructors to **know thy self**. Instructors with limited experience leading discussions, with a high need for control, with low ambiguity tolerance, or who face extended institutional demands to cover a pre-specified amount of material in their courses are likely to find case discussions to be very frustrating. There are ways to minimize these problems. For example, the case studies that are included in *Strategic Organizational Communication* are more narrow and more focused than those in generic case books (e.g., Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, *Case Studies in Organizational Communication: Understanding Communication Processes* or Steve May, ed., *Case Studies in Organizational Communication: Ethical Perspectives and Processes* in communication or Peter Drucker, *Management Cases*, Stella Nkomo, Myron Fottler, & R. Bruce McAfee, *Human Resource Management Applications* in business). They are designed to be used in conjunction with particular parts of the text, and to illustrate, apply, or explain the key concepts that

have just been introduced. Combining a mini-lecture with a discussion of one of these focused cases allows an instructor to maintain a greater degree of control of the discussion while still encouraging interaction and critical analysis. Focused case discussions are particularly appropriate for instructors new to the case format and for all instructors early in the semester before a ‘community’ climate has been developed or before students have become accustomed to the case discussion format. Once instructor and students become familiar with case discussions and once a supportive climate has been created, more open-ended case discussions can be very productive. (Note: the same general principles apply to the use of media in the classroom. Early in the semester, a segment of pbs’ *The Newshour*, which will last 15-30 minutes, can be combined with a mini-lecture that links it to conceptual material from the text. Later in the semester one can devote an entire class period to the discussion of a more open-ended case, or example, an hour-long episode of ‘Frontline,’ or a recent movie).

The second step in preparing for case discussions is to **know thy case**. Reviewing the details and nuances are important because every part of the case may become a focal point of discussion, but knowing where the case fits in the overall conceptual development of the course is equally important. Develop a set of **teaching notes** for each case. These notes should include a brief synopsis of the case (including parts that may be problematic because they are unclear, potentially offensive to some students, etc.), a statement of the pedagogical goals of including the case, links to other concepts covered in the course, a substantive analysis of the case, any additional information that the instructor may wish to introduce during the case discussion, and a brief bibliography of further readings. Advice based on our experience with each case is included in the chapter summaries of this manual. For example, Charley (Conrad) uses the My Lai Massacre as a case study of power and authority relationships. He begins by reading (usually quite badly--he has limited skills in the oral performance of literature) the summary included in H. Kellman and L. Hamilton’s *Crimes of Obedience* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1989). An episode of the PBS series, “The American Experience” offers an excellent documentary on line, entitled “My Lai.” His students invariably want to talk about Lt. Calley’s behavior at My Lai, but the primary purpose of the case is to discuss the different responses to Calley’s orders because *that* is the nexus of the issues of compliance and resistance. Anticipating this reaction, he begins by explicitly focusing the discussion on the other participants, returning to Calley only at the end of the discussion. At that point he is able to use the students’ defense or condemnation of Calley as examples of the tendencies to develop *undetermined* and/or *overdetermined* views of human behavior in high-authority situations (the second key concept that he wants to illustrate through the case). All of this is in his teaching notes, including likely student comments, follow-up questions, and so on.

The final step is to **know thy students**. Some of ours initially tend to resist the case approach, especially in institutions (or majors or departments) where the

traditional lecture format is dominant, just as subordinates often resist power sharing in bureaucratic organizations. Our organizational communication classes are large compared to those taught in many universities and our students, especially those from Science and Engineering, find the thought of discussion (and writing term papers, for that matter) to be very intimidating. We've even had honors students in classes of 20 students ask, "You mean we can talk?" Of course, the answer is yes, but we often have to say so explicitly, and repeatedly, and reinforce it in every way possible before they believe it. Instructors (like supervisors) can overcome this resistance by (1) creating expectations about the format of the class, and (2) creating a supportive climate. Including discussion questions on the syllabus, doing a short case analysis on the first day of class, and making your first case assignment for the second day all help create appropriate expectations, as will beginning the class session with a structure that includes the case analysis for that day. Similarly, using pre-class time, post-class time, office hours, and electronic media to get to know your students' backgrounds and experiences provides you with important information about the bases of their resistance and about topics with which they might feel very comfortable or very uncomfortable. Given the increasing diversity of students in our classrooms, being culturally sensitive is perhaps an important issue that all instructors today must face and address as part of our teaching experiences. On the one hand, instructors should be cautious of any cultural stereotypes; on the other hand, we need to be aware of and therefore, prepare for cultural differences that might have impacts on students' classroom behaviors. For instance, given the high-context and hierarchical nature of some Asian cultures, students with Asian cultural backgrounds, such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese cultures, might be more accustomed to the lecturing style in classrooms and less active in participating in case discussions. Instead of pressuring them to talk, instructors can normally encourage them to participate through creating better contextual factors for them. For example, small group discussions are usually perceived as a lower-threat situation in which those students are more likely to express their opinions and to interact with their group members. Setting up email discussion groups also may be helpful. In addition, helping them create some sense of familiarity and belongingness usually makes Asian students feel much more comfortable and hence, more willing to contribute in classroom discussions. A word of caution we want to suggest here is that when cultural factors constitute barriers for students to participation, instructors should avoid making any moral judgment in terms of responsibilities regarding classroom participation. Instructors should be prepared to be more patient and more supportive with students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Creating a supportive climate is more difficult with students from more reticent cultures. The key is the instructor's ability to use her or his superior power position to reduce students' vulnerability by demonstrating respect for students' judgment, supporting dissent and dissenters, rewarding students for taking risks, and otherwise creating a climate of tolerance and civility. It is unlikely that this kind of climate will exist on the first day of class—it takes time

and work to develop it—and it is unlikely that such a climate will develop without the instructor’s strategic intervention. But it is crucial for discussion/case analysis to succeed—defensiveness reduces creativity and fosters rigidity, both of which destroy discussion and its advantages.

## CONDUCTING CASE DISCUSSIONS

The biggest problem encountered by instructors new to the case discussion approach is simple—getting the discussion started. Setting appropriate expectations helps, as does using a consistent structure for case discussion. The most common structure begins with a summary of “WIGOH”: what is going on here (the “facts” of the case—characters and relationships, setting, chronology of events). The case studies in the fifth edition all include "applying what you've learned" questions that are designed to facilitate this process. As long as students have read the case they can answer these questions. It is an especially good point in the discussion to encourage normally reticent students to participate. You can ask them (and it is important to ask more than one) at the end of one class to be prepared to summarize the events of the case that will be discussed next time. Calling or emailing selected students is a less public way to do this; using “cool” questions is a more public technique. Arrive early and let them know that you will call on them. Then, while you are doing normal beginning-of-class “business,” they can review their notes and be ready to respond when the time comes. Or you can create “break out” groups that meet and develop summaries (either outside of class time or during class). Placing your most talkative students in the same group, and calling on the other groups first is one way to keep overly confident, vocally active students from dominating the discussion.

The second phase is the analyses itself, guiding the group to look at the “facts” in ways that help students understand the problems and issues. The "questions to think about and discuss" at the end of each case are designed to help instructors with this phase of the discussion. It is difficult to predict the exact sequence that the group will go through in doing so, as recent research indicates is true of task groups in general. Discussion really is group improvisation, and although the leader can intervene at key points to move the improvisation in certain directions, the process is fluid and evolving. Instructors can do many things to encourage discussion, but it is perhaps more important that they not inhibit it. The most frequent “non-facilitating” instructor behaviors seem to be:

*Insufficient “wait time” between asking a question and answering it (increasing wait time from 1 second to 3-5 seconds significantly reduces failures to respond and increases the number and length of unsolicited responses as well as student-to student interactions); Rapid acceptance and reward of “correct” responses both terminates thought among those who have not yet responded (and discourages them from thinking about subsequent questions) and discourages multiple perspective-taking;*

*Encouraging programmed answers via leading questions;*

*Using nonspecific feedback questions.* Examples include “Guess what I’m thinking?”; “Does anybody have any questions?” (or “not understand?”) [and would like to admit his or her ignorance in front of everyone]; “The correct answer is \_\_\_\_\_” (after listening to a number of student responses); and any other question that moves the group away from analyzing the case; *Fixation at a level of ‘facts.’* The primary purpose of case discussion is to encourage what Bloom has called “higher-order” learning (application of theory and critical thinking); it doesn’t occur if the instructor doesn’t ask higher-order questions.

The second biggest problem in case analysis is structuring the flow of an unstructured discussion. The simplest way to do so seems to be the use of a chalkboard (or marker board), which may explain why even in the age of educational multimedia, such boards still are omnipresent. There simply is no better way to create structure from a free-flowing discussion. Grouping related comments together and writing them down creates structure from a discussion that seems to be chaotic, helps students see connections among comments, and makes them feel that they are not alone. It also helps the instructor balance the participation of different students. Verbally active students who make redundant comments can be acknowledged, but it is not necessary to write down their comments. Reticent students who are known to have experience that is relevant to a particular comment can be asked to expand that statement. Students who make comments that are insightful but irrelevant to the current discussion can be rewarded by explaining how their contributions are related to concepts discussed previously or ones that will be discussed later in the course. But, by not writing such comments on the board, the instructor can preclude their “chaining out” into a lengthy diversion away from the case. When a student makes a comment that is insightful but irrelevant to previous comments, the instructor can enlist the student’s help in figuring out where to write it down, that is, to explain how it is related to other comments. The chalkboard can be used both to bring order out of chaos and to encourage further relevant interaction. The optimal way of displaying student comments depends to a large degree on the “personality” (for lack of a better term) of the class. Some classes thrive on conflict--they will argue with one another about anything. Others, for whatever reasons, are reticent to disagree with one another. Still others develop a “dominant ideology” that discourages students from voicing different views. By grouping similar comments together, and explicitly noting their connection, instructors can mitigate against the first tendency; by arraying them in opposition to one another, she or he can focus the discussion on differing views. When students do offer positions that are at variance to the dominant perspective, instructors can positively reinforce those students, often by expanding or extending their comments. An effective way to do this without appearing to “take sides” is to link the comment to other concepts that have been (or will be) covered in the course. Doing so reinforces the student who made the concept, and encourages members of the dominant group to take the comment seriously.

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The final phase of case discussion is the closing. At minimum, the closing must summarize the analysis phase of the case discussion, drawing links between the facts of the case and the group's analysis of it. Often the instructor's goals for the discussion will not have been fully met by the case analysis itself. Consequently, case discussions often are concluded with a mini-lecture that places the analysis in the broader context of the unit and course, and makes connections among theoretical constructs that may not have emerged. And, almost always, the instructor will need to preview the next class period, to provide a conceptual link between the class that is ending and the ones that will follow. There are many ways to continue the dialogue that began during the case analysis. The simplest is to "hang around," giving students who want to discuss the case further, or whose thinking has been stimulated in new directions by the mini-lecture, time to do so. Students who are reticent or who cannot stay can submit anonymous written questions and the instructor can begin the next class by discussing them. Students also can be encouraged to continue the discussion during office hours, either individually or, preferably, with a classmate. Or they can be encouraged to submit comments or further questions via e-mail. These questions and the instructor's response can then be forwarded to the other students electronically (via a "listserv" that the instructor has created from e-mail addresses submitted at the beginning of the semester), and/or they can be used to start subsequent questions/case analyses. To the extent that discussions continue beyond the confines of an individual class session, it is easier to get them started during the next class, and their pedagogical value is increased.

## **SUMMARY**

Of course, we have only scratched the surface of the case analysis method. In some ways communication professionals find it easier to use case discussions than do people in other fields. Our training in interpersonal and group communication gives us some background in the required interactional dynamics,

and the nature of our subject matter provides ample opportunity for multiple perspective taking. Organizational communication instructors also have an advantage because an extensive literature exists on using case discussion in management courses (see the list that follows). But, it is a challenging mode of teaching, one that is complicated by the scope of our area, the limited “real world” experiences of many of our students, and institutional demands to increase class size and enrollment.

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