



# Case Study User's Guide



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**“We need every Marine and Sailor to seek creative solutions to today’s and tomorrow’s complex problems.... to ensuring we can Innovate, Adapt, and Win!” *Marine Operating Concept***

**1. Purpose:** Provide unit leaders with information on how to lead small group case studies.

**2. Intent:**

**a. Purpose:** The purpose of case studies is to use historical scenarios as an analytical guide for: 1) professional discussion and debate in pursuit of solutions to current real-world problems and leadership challenges; and 2) developing the critical thinking and creative decision-making abilities of participants. Case studies are also an effective way to rehearse the practical application of leadership and ethical principles (reps and sets), to demonstrate the value of diversity in decision-making, to connect Marines with their legacy of character and competence in a meaningful way, and to strengthen team cohesion.

**b. Methodology:**

(1) Case studies are conducted in a Socratic, student-centered learning environment where the students take the lead in the discovery process, guided by the instructor. Rather than serving as a lecturing “sage on the stage,” the instructor functions as a facilitator, moderator, devil’s advocate, and fellow-student who guides discussion with thought provoking questions intended to draw out key themes and principles and to exploit teachable moments that emerge from the dynamic interaction. Unlike lectures, case study discussions unfold without a detailed script or pre-determined outcomes -- the aim is to teach participants how to think rather than what to think.

(2) Successful case study discussions rely heavily on both preparation and spontaneity. A precondition for a successful case study is all participants have thoroughly studied and analyzed the associated historic narrative, supporting materials, and assignment questions and are prepared to challenge the group with their unique experienced-based insights. Additionally, the instructor must be prepared to stimulate thought-provoking discussion through targeted, thematic, open-ended questions; all-hands prompting; cold-calls; follow-ups; and summations. Thorough preparation and effective moderation in an environment of mutual respect set the conditions for a rich free-exchange of ideas and unconstrained learning.

(3) Effective case study leaders guide students to discover unchanging principles applicable to current challenges, alternatives to conventional wisdom, and new approaches to problem solving across key themes and focus areas relevant to the Marine Corps. The following are examples of pertinent interest areas which should emerge naturally from case narratives and provide direction for continued discussion and debate:

**(a) Warfighting Themes**

- Nature/Character of Warfare
- Command and Leadership
- Strategic and Military Culture
- Learning and Adaptation
- Maneuver Warfare
- Geography
- Sustainment
- Unity of Effort

**(b) Advance to Contact -- Five Vital Areas**

- People
- Readiness
- Training/Simulation/Experimentation
- Integration with the Naval and Joint Force
- Modernization and Technology

**(c) Marine Operating Concept – Five Critical Tasks**

- Integrate the Naval force to fight at and from the sea
- Evolve the MAGTF
- Operate with resilience in a contested-network environment
- Enhance our ability to maneuver
- Exploit the competence of the individual Marine

**c. Desired Outcomes:** Case studies are intended to achieve the following goals:

- (1) Develop student skills in critical thinking, creative problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and leadership.
- (2) Involve more personnel in the pursuit of solutions to current operational and leadership challenges.
- (3) Provide personnel with an effective way to rehearse the practical application of leadership and ethical principles (reps and sets)
- (4) Demonstrate the value of diversity in decision-making.
- (5) Educate Marines on the nature of war and the principles of warfighting.
- (6) Encourage students to have more responsibility for their learning, and promote skills, practices, and disciplines that enable lifelong learning and independent problem-solving.
- (7) Demonstrate an effective method of teaching that can be replicated by participants with future students.
- (8) Connect Marines with their legacy of character and competence in a meaningful way.

(9) Strengthen team cohesion.

### 3. Case Study Preparation.

**a. Student Responsibilities:** The primary responsibility of students preparing for a case study class is to thoroughly study and analyze the associated historic narrative, supporting materials, and assignment questions. The goal of preparation is not simply to be prepared to regurgitate facts and chronologies but rather to – understand the “big picture” as well as the game-changing “little details”; identify key themes and principles as well as their applicability to current challenges; identify key causal relationships in their complexity; identify the primary problems and dilemmas faced by protagonists; and identify key decision makers, factors which influenced their decision-making calculus, consequences of their decisions, and alternative approaches to their decisions and actions. Drawing from their personal knowledge and experiences, students should prepare to contribute insightfully and creatively to the group learning environment. If possible students should seek opportunities to discuss the materials with other students before the case study session.

**b. Case Study Leader Responsibilities:** In preparing for the discussion, the leader must become fully conversant with the facts of the case, and should conduct the same analysis he/she expects the group to engage in. Beyond that basic requirement, the leader must prepare both content and process, including a clear set of teaching/learning objectives, a call list, a board plan, an opening question, discussion probes, transitions, follow-up questions, and closing comments. The leader must also prepare the discussion venue – audio/visual requirements, seating arrangement/assignments, supplemental materials, etc. Thorough preparation includes learning about the backgrounds of the students (ideally a small group) in order to develop an informed call plan that maximized the richness of their diverse experiences. Case study leaders should be prepared to start and end the session on time while ensuring all-hands participation and adequate time to summarize group outcomes. Finally, case study leaders should have a plan to collect and share post-event critiques.

### 4. Case Study Execution:

**a. Student Responsibilities:** Students should be ready to start on time and to positively contribute to the learning environment, understanding that there are no passive observers in case study sessions. Effective participation balances active, analytical listening with constructive comments, critique, and debate that draws out and expands upon major learning points. Students must be ready to take intellectual risks and to challenge status quo and group think, while remaining receptive to differing viewpoints and while maintaining mutual respect among participants. Critical thinking must never devolve into cynical thinking, and animated discussions must never become aggravated discussions.

**b. Case Study Leader Responsibilities:** The case study leader (CSL) sets the stage by introducing the material, establishing the learning objectives, explaining the rules of engagement, and starting the discussion pasture. The case study leader actively manages class flow and structure, while responding flexibly to student comments. The CSL poses challenging questions, cold/warm calls, and follow-ups to promote high quality class discussion; stimulates thoughtful

student-to-student discussion and encourages participation from all students; draws on student background information in guiding the class discussion; provides closure to discussion segments with appropriate transitions; and finally, concludes the session with appropriate synthesis, takeaways, and recommendations for further study and actions.

**5. Keys to Success.** The quality of a case study session is determined by the quality of the questions asked and answers given. Harvard Business School Professor C. Roland Christensen described case method teaching as “the art of asking the right question, of the right student, at the right time—and in the right way.”

The “right” questions promote learning and discovery, pique student interest, and yield dynamic discussions. Questions themselves cannot exist in isolation, but instead form part of the basic triad of questioning, listening, and responding. Asking a question entails active listening and a thoughtful response—often in the form of another question or follow-up probe. Good questions take into account the specific audience (What are the students’ needs, interests, and abilities?), the pedagogical goals of the class (What are the key learning objectives? Why should students care?), and the content and class plan (Which case features are relevant, surprising, confusing, etc.? How is the material sequenced?). Whether it calls for analysis, encourages debate, or solicits recommendations for action, a question is most effective when it fits the needs of a specific class context and helps guide students individually and collectively towards discovery and learning.<sup>1</sup>

The below sample questions (a slightly modified list from Harvard Business School) are provided for consideration.<sup>2</sup> These sample questions are organized into four main categories, which mirror the four major ways in which a discussion leader uses questions:

**a. Starting a discussion:** Framing students’ approach to the case study. At the beginning of case discussions, questions involving assessment, diagnosis, or recommendation/action tend to be more effective for stimulating learning than purely descriptive questions such as “What is the situation?” or “What are the issues?”

**(1) Assessment:**

“How serious is the situation?”  
“How successful is this [protagonist]?”  
“How attractive is the opportunity under consideration?”  
“What’s at stake here?”

**(2) Diagnosis:**

“What is the most significant problem/challenge faced by the [protagonist]?”  
“Who or what is [responsible/to blame] for the crisis faced by the [protagonist]?”  
“Why has the [protagonist] performed so well/poorly?”

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<sup>1</sup> “Questions for Class Discussions”, C. Roland Christensen Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard Business School

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Note: The list of questions provided, along with their explanations, are only slightly modified from the above reference, though detailed quoting and footnoting has been omitted to avoid confusion to the reader.

“As [the case protagonist], what keeps you up at night? What are you most worried about?”

**(3) Recommendation/Action:**

“Which of the [three] options presented in the case would you pursue?”

“What would you recommend to the [protagonist]?”

“What would be your plan of action?”

**b. Following up:** Responding to student comments by probing for more depth (drilling down), opening up the discussion to more participants (moving laterally), or asking for generalization/reflection/synthesis (linking up). Case study leaders should consider that, while follow-ups are necessary to guide the discussion and challenge students, excessive interventions can lead to instructor-focused, hub-and-spoke exchanges. Greater depth of analysis can be achieved through general probes and questions exploring underlying assumptions and boundary conditions.

**(1) General probes:**

“Why?”

“Could you say a little more about that?”

“Could you walk us through your logic/thought process?”

“What leads you to that conclusion?”

“How did you come up with that estimate?”

“Do we have any evidence to support that?”

“How did you interpret that exhibit/quote/data/information?”

“Why is that important?”

“What are the implications?”

**(2) Underlying assumptions and boundary conditions:**

“What indicators/measures/criteria are you using to support your analysis?”

“What are you assuming with respect to [x, y, z]?”

“Do you have any concerns? How might they be addressed?”

“If we assume [x] instead of [y], does that change your conclusion/recommendation?”

“What would it take for you to change your conclusion/recommendation?”

“Was the outcome inevitable?” “Could it have been prevented?”

“To what extent was the [protagonist] just lucky?”

“Is that consistent with [another student’s earlier point]?”

“How does this compare with what we discussed/concluded previously?”

**(3) To open the discussion to other students:** Although the instructor may call on another student without responding at all to the previous comment, it is often helpful to provide some guidance for the subsequent contributor. It is particularly useful to indicate whether the next student should respond directly to the previous comment or not.

**(a) The questions may be prefaced by framing statements such as:**

“Let’s stick with this”

“[Student X] is arguing [y].”

“Any reactions?”

“What about that?” “What do you think?” “Is that right?” “Any concerns?” “Do you buy that?” “Any questions for [previous student]?”

“Who would like to build on [previous student]’s point?”

“Does everyone agree?”

“Does anyone see it differently?”

“Can someone help us [work through this analysis, resolve this confusion]?”

“Can anyone address [student x]’s concern?”

**(b) Broadening the discussion:**

“Other perspectives?”

“Are we missing anything?”

“Are there other issues we should consider?”

“Who can reconcile these different interpretations/conclusions/points of view?”

**(4) To encourage generalization, reflection, or synthesis:** Case study leaders can help students integrate new concepts and internalize takeaways by challenging them to link key learnings to broader leadership issues or experiences from their own lives:

“What do you take away from today’s discussion/case?”

“What’s the moral of this story?”

“Why should leaders care about these issues?”

“In what other situations would the lessons/principles of today’s case apply?”

“Has anyone confronted a similar challenge in their own work experience?”

**c. Transitioning:** Bridging the current situation with the next discussion block, which may include checking for student comprehension before moving on. Transitions are often preceded by two types of questions: 1) comprehension-checking questions that invite questions or final thoughts, and 2) framing questions that link the current situation to the new one.

“Have we missed anything important?”

“Any final comments before we move on?”

“Before we get into [x], are there any questions?”

“Is everyone comfortable moving on to [...]?”

“Now that we’ve established [x], what about [y]?”

“In light of our discussion of [x], what should we do about [y]?”

“What are the implications of [x]?”

“So we’re clear on [x]—shall we move on to [y]?”

“Before getting into the details, how do we think about how we should approach the analysis?”

**d. Handling special challenges:** There are a variety of student contributions that can create challenges for discussion leadership. Examples include tangential, non-sequitur, long, complex, and/or confusing comments. Instructors also may find it difficult to know how best to respond to incorrect answers or the use of offensive or inappropriate language by a student. In many of these instances, it may be difficult to redirect or refocus the comment without interrupting the student. To capture the student’s attention and reduce the likelihood of causing offense or embarrassment, it is helpful to begin the response by making eye contact, saying the

student's name, and offering a neutral-to-complimentary observation such as –

“That’s an interesting perspective,”

“You’re raising some important issues,”

“I hear you saying that [ . . . ].”

**(1) Tangential or non-sequitur comments:**

“How does that relate to what [previous student] was saying?”

“Let’s hold off on that for the moment. Can we first resolve the [issue/debate] on the table?”

“We’ll get to that a little later in the discussion. Let’s stay with [previous student]’s question.”

“Let’s park that [on the side board], and I’ll look for you when we get to [later discussion topic]”

**(2) For esoteric contributions:**

“Why don’t we take that off-line.”

**(3) Long, rambling comments:**

“You’re raising a number of issues. Let’s focus on [x].”

“It sounds like you’re concerned about [x]. Let’s explore that.”

“So you basically disagree with [the previous student] because [x, y]. [To previous student]: would you like to respond?”

“I hear you saying [x]. Does everyone agree?”

“What’s the headline?”

**(4) Complex or confusing comments:**

“Let’s slow this down for a minute.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time.”

“How would you explain that to someone unfamiliar with technical language?”

“Let’s keep it simple.”

“Before digging into the numbers/details, let’s make sure we understand the basic intuition.”

“You mention [x]. I’m not sure everyone is familiar with that concept. Could you clarify?”

“I just want to make sure I understand your argument. You’re saying [ . . . ]?”

**(5) Incorrect answers:** Incorrect answers might stem from a lack of preparation, legitimate confusion, or other causes, such as ambiguous questions or lack of clear direction. For factually incorrect comments containing minor inaccuracies not central to the discussion, it is often appropriate for the instructor to respond with a gentle correction. Faulty or incomplete analysis can serve as a learning opportunity for the student and the class. Ideally, the instructor will 1) not abandon the student, 2) not confuse other students by letting incorrect answers pass unchallenged, and 3) address the reason for the misperception, not just the misperception itself. When possible, the instructor should guide the student or his/her classmates to correct the error.

“Where in the case did you find that?”

“Could you walk us through how you came up with that?”



“Did anyone come up with a different answer?” “Let’s see if we can reconcile these different results.”

“This is a particularly complex analysis. Let’s make sure the basic assumptions are clear.”

**(6) Offensive or inappropriate language:**

“Would you like to take another shot at/rephrase that?”

“Hold on just a second. Do you want to try that again?”

“In less colorful language?”

**6. Conclusion:** Past is prologue – history sets the context for the present. Case studies are a highly effective and enjoyable way to learn lessons from the past and apply them to future current and future challenges. Case studies provide valuable reps and sets for the development of critical thinking and creative decision-making abilities, while promoting teambuilding and collaborative problem-solving. Importantly, effective case studies require rigorous preparation and pre-work by all participants. Students must come fully prepared to positively contribute to a dynamic group learning environment through thought provoking commentary, active listening, real-time analysis, and constructive discussion and debate. Case study leaders must be prepared stimulate and sustain fruitful discussion and debate through questioning, while managing the discussion through the artful balance of structure and flexibility. While adroit case study leaders know how to bring a case study session to a logical conclusion, a successful case study should leave participants with a sense that the discussion has only just begun, and everyone should walk away with heightened interest in autonomous learning and problem-solving.

**Officers are expected to have a solid foundation in military theory and a knowledge of military history and the timeless lessons to be gained from it. *MCDP 1***



Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb poses with Major General A. A. Vandegrift, Major General Roy C. Geiger, and their commanders and staff on Guadalcanal.