The University of Auckland Business Case Centre

a new resource for business professionals and students

By Christina A. Stringer and Kevin Morris

The University of Auckland Business School is taking an important step toward building an interactive learning community for New Zealand business people and students. The new University of Auckland Business Case Centre, to be officially launched in October 2003, will produce and distribute case studies about a variety of businesses and organisations. The case studies will be available online to business educators and managers. The goal is to establish a library of studies that document important milestones in the operations and management of New Zealand organisations.

Some leading business schools such as the Harvard Business School, the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, and the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario specialise in the writing and teaching of case studies. The case studies they produce, however, invariably focus on North American, European or Asian companies or organisations. The University of Auckland Business Case Centre will produce case studies about Australian and New Zealand organisations and industries, and will ultimately provide a substantial knowledge base for academia, business and government (see the following article by Stringer and Haworth in this issue which discusses the lack of material available on the performance of New Zealand companies operating in Asia).

Internationally, business leaders have found the process of working with business schools in developing case studies to be of great benefit to their organisations. The case studies provide an opportunity for senior management to think more deeply about the overall performance and strategic direction of their organisation. In addition to working with faculty to prepare the cases, managers might contribute by visiting classes and engaging in discussions with students. In many situations, long-term partnerships between the university and organisations are developed and there are ongoing recruiting opportunities. The case studies will be used for pedagogical purposes, in addition to providing a rich resource for organisations.

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) recently formed a partnership with The University of Auckland Business Case Centre to produce a series of cases that highlight important decisions managers have faced in developing their businesses at home and abroad. One of NZTE's objectives is helping to grow GDP by working with companies that are displaying growth or have growth potential. Julian Kroll, NZTE Business Development Advisor, believes the development of a case study is helpful for many reasons. It "allows the company to reflect on its organisation's evolution. An objective review is written about the business, its history, current state and possible future direction".

Case studies are written and prepared by faculty and researchers at the university. They are based on interviews and information provided by the featured company, organisation or individual. The final document is typically 5-15 pages and provides a factual description of an important decision or a situation a company has faced, along with details about the options regarding the managerial dilemma.

The case studies are used in a variety of educational settings, including company training sessions and university classes. The goal is to put the reader into a business executive's shoes. All the background materials and relevant information is provided to make a decision, but the reader isn't told what actually happened – or how and why decisions were ultimately made.

University students receive a case several days before the class and they are asked to prepare solutions to several pertinent questions. In the classroom, the instructor initiates the discussion by asking students to describe their analysis of the situation and how they would handle the circumstances as the leader or manager. With varied opinions in a classroom, the conversation inevitably evolves into a lively debate, with the instructor shaping and moderating the discussion. Typically, executives from the company are also invited to attend the class. When the students have sufficiently debated the topic, the executives then have the opportunity to respond to questions and explain the decisions they made.

Professor Wendell Dunn, Foundation Chair in Entrepreneurship at The University of Auckland Business School, has taught with case studies for 25 years. He says that, for businesses, it is also a way to step out of their day-to-day situation. "It draws insight and solution," he says. "It's powerful to watch your company being examined by students whose only interest is getting to the point. It's their lack of loyalty to the company that is most useful, because you're getting an unvarnished view of the circumstances. Many companies go away shaking their heads, realising they couldn't have answered the same questions had they simply asked themselves. Dispassionate eyes are invaluable. They see things that others can't."

Many business educators believe that learning is accelerated under case study conditions and students quickly develop a range of social and intellectual management skills, such as the ability to listen to others, challenge assumptions, formulate strategies and convincingly articulate business terminologies. With executives visiting classes on a regular basis, students also have the opportunity to hear about real-world situations. Says Dunn: "Case studies are a bit like a colleague describing a situation to you. You may have to form a judgement based on incomplete and insufficient information, make a decision, or give advice. Very rarely in business do we have all the facts or data, so you could argue that case studies are very fair representations of the kinds of situations we find ourselves in every day. Working with limited information is a great challenge and a powerful learning device." Over time, a student develops a personal decision-making style and philosophy that have been tested and sharpened in the classroom.

"As others have said," Dunn adds, "you can't lecture on wisdom. Wisdom can be learned, but it can't be taught. The basis of wisdom is informed judgement, so management education must be for judgement."

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the University of Auckland Business Case Centre, the case writing process, and to view and obtain copies of cases or register for e-mail updates, visit **www.casecentre.auckland.ac.nz**

The Business Case Centre is also interested in hearing from companies and executives who are interested in participating in case studies. Please send your contact information to **casecentre@auckland.ac.nz**

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