

# GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR HBS EXPERIENCE

We understand how difficult it can be to transition from the “real world” to the academic environment. We have created this resource to help you make the most of your HBS Executive Education experience, whether you are with us for a few days or for longer, are learning in a class with colleagues or with complete strangers, or have some experience with the case method or none at all.

On the companion Web site ([www.exed.hbs.edu/corporaterelations/gtm/](http://www.exed.hbs.edu/corporaterelations/gtm/)) you'll find a video of actual classes, and comments or advice from some of our Executive Education participants. The section on discussion groups will be helpful regardless of whether your program has formal discussion groups or you recruit a few classmates on your own to prepare a case you have been assigned.

## Introduction

### The Case Method

The case method is not only the most relevant and practical way to learn managerial skills, it's exciting and fun. But it can also be very confusing if you're not familiar with it.

Simply stated, the case method calls for discussion of real-life situations that business executives have faced. Case writers, as good reporters, have written up these situations to present you with the information available to the executives involved. As you review their cases, you will put yourself in the shoes of the managers, analyze the situation, decide what you would do, and come to class prepared to present and support your conclusions.

### How Cases Help You Learn

Cases will help you sharpen your analytical skills, since you must produce quantitative and qualitative evidence to support your recommendations. In case discussions, instructors will challenge you and your fellow participants to defend your arguments and analyses. You will hone both your problem solving and your ability to think and reason rigorously.

Because case studies cut across a range of organizations and situations, they provide you with an exposure far greater than you are likely to experience in your day-to-day routine. They also permit you to build knowledge in various management subjects by dealing selectively and intensively with problems in each field. You will quickly recognize that the problems you face as a manager are not unique to one organization or industry. From this you will develop a more professional sense of management.

In class discussions, each participant brings to bear his or her own expertise, experience, observation, and analysis. This diversity of opinion from differing perspectives offers real opportunities for shared learning.

Perhaps the most important benefit of using cases is that they help managers to learn how to determine what the real problem is and to ask the right questions. An able business leader once commented, “Ninety percent of the task of a top manager is asking the right questions. Answers are relatively easy to find, but asking good questions is a critical skill.”

Good case discussions reinvigorate the sense of fun and excitement that comes with being a manager. You will sense once again that being a manager is a great challenge—intellectually, politically, and socially.



## Case Preparation

### How to Prepare a Case

The use of the case method calls first for you, working individually, to carefully read and to think about each case. (Typically about two hours of preparation time for each case are provided in the schedule.) No single way to prepare a case works for everyone. However, here are some general guidelines that you can adapt to create a method that works for you.



### Prepare a Case Step-by-Step

**Read the professor's assignment/discussion questions.** These questions are provided to help you focus on certain aspects of the case.

**Read the first few paragraphs, then skim the case.** Ask yourself, "What, broadly, is the case about, and what types of information am I being given to analyze?" Cases begin with pages of text description followed by exhibits containing quantitative and qualitative information.

**Next, read the case more carefully, underlining text and writing margin notes as you go.** Ask yourself, "What are the basic problems this manager is trying to resolve?" Put yourself in the manager's shoes. Make the manager's problems your problems.

**Note the key problems or issues on a pad of paper. Go through the case again.**

**Sort out relevant considerations for each problem area.**

**Do appropriate qualitative and quantitative analysis.**

**Develop a set of recommendations, supported by your analysis of the case data.**

## Preparing a Case

Once you have done your individual preparation, it's time to realize the benefit of a discussion group. Many Executive Education course schedules have time set aside for your groups to meet to discuss cases before attending classes. Living group discussions are not meant to create consensus. Rather they are designed to help members refine, adjust, and amplify their thinking.

To maximize the benefit of the group's discussion, it is extremely important that you not skip or skimp on your preparation. If you take the easy way out and just familiarize yourself with the facts, saving all preparation to be done in your living group, you will deprive yourself of the opportunity to practice the very skills that you wanted to obtain by coming to the course.

## Getting the Most out of Your Discussion Group

A discussion group consists of a small number of participants who meet to discuss the day's assignments after each participant has completed his or her individual case preparation. For some programs formal discussion groups have been assembled to reflect the variety of experience and sectors represented among program participants.

Discussion groups are characterized by intense interaction that deepens the participants' understanding beyond that gained through individual analysis. This interaction includes dialogue, shared expertise, and constructive argument. Many participants find that they not only deepen their understanding of the material, but that they also experience an increase in their comfort level by sharing their ideas and insights later in the large in-class discussion.

## Benefits of a Discussion Group

Participants find that working with their discussion groups provides a number of benefits:

Better understanding of the material

- Practice in teaching and learning from others
- Opportunities to "test-market" ideas and opinions prior to the larger in-class discussion
- Ability to get to know a handful of people more deeply during your HBS stay

# Getting the Most out of Your Discussion Group

---

The HBS Executive Education experience is so transformational because of the world-class business leaders who attend our programs. For that reason, the time you spend in discussion can be as powerful a learning opportunity as the classroom experience.

On the companion Web site you can listen to former Executive Education participants as they talk about the importance of the dialogue that occurs in groups.

There is no “one right way” to conduct a discussion group. Over the years, though, HBS MBA students and Executive Education participants have reported that the following factors in particular make for effective discussion groups.



## Discussion Group Best Practices

---

Effective discussion groups work best when . . .

### **One participant is designated as the discussion leader.**

The program staff has assembled the groups and randomly designated a discussion leader for each group. The leader’s role is that of facilitator. The leader’s goal is to be helpful in moving the group through the discussion questions that accompany each case. He or she is not the group’s CEO.

### **Attendance is 100 percent.**

The groups are intended to be a microcosm of the entire class, so it is critical that all participants be involved in each discussion.

### **All members participate in the discussion and share responsibility for content.**

Relying on a specific “subject-matter expert” in the group to take complete responsibility for a particular case is not always helpful or appropriate. Often a “non-expert” will ask

a particularly insightful question that can push the discussion in an important direction.

**Groups accept differing perspectives as normal, desirable, and inevitable. Don’t try to reach consensus.** Often participants find that their initial understanding of the material is significantly enhanced when other group members who saw the problem differently challenge it.

**Groups are disciplined, focused, and use time wisely.** It’s easy in the heat of discussion to get off track or to filibuster your idea. Remember, discussions are best when they are two-way; a dialogue. Designate a timekeeper and make sure everyone who wants to share has an opportunity.

**Members accept the responsibility to learn and teach.** Different participants will have different strengths and weaknesses. Even if you feel unsure of your understanding of a particular case or reading, your thoughtful questions and tentative ideas contribute to the learning of others, so you should feel comfortable being an active participant.

## Tips for Discussion Leaders

---

- You may find it helpful to have a brief conversation about the best practices mentioned in this document the first time your discussion group meets, so that all participants have an awareness of the value and importance of the discussion group process.
- Think of yourself as a facilitator of the discussion. Don’t feel an unnecessary burden to master all of the content more thoroughly than other group members do.
- Guide your fellow group members through the study questions for each assignment. Keep a close eye on time so that the group has the benefit of discussing all of the cases and readings, rather than just the first one of the morning or afternoon.
- The study questions are designed to keep the group focused on the key issues that will contribute to an effective discussion in the larger class meeting. Take care to keep the group from straying too far into personal anecdotes or issues that may not be particularly relevant to core points of the case.
- If a subset of members seems to be dominating the discussions, encourage quieter members to participate by specifically asking for their points of view about the topic at hand.
- If you have questions during the week about how to handle a specific situation that may arise in your group, please feel free to ask the staff for assistance.

# The Classroom Experience

The classroom environment is at the heart of the HBS experience.

Take a moment to go inside the classroom. The classroom video, which you will find on the companion Web site at [www.exed.hbs.edu/corporaterelations/gtm/](http://www.exed.hbs.edu/corporaterelations/gtm/), is narrated by Professor David A. Garvin, faculty chair, C. Roland Christensen Teaching and Learning Center. The Center helps strengthen the School's long tradition of world-class teaching.



## Classroom Video Transcript

First of all, let me describe how the classrooms work. The classrooms at the Business School are in a modified amphitheater form with tiered seating, name cards for participants, and blackboards and modern audiovisual equipment at the front. The rooms are specifically designed so that participants can see one another, which encourages conversation, cross-talk, and the sharing of ideas. The professor works in the center of the room, often called “the pit.” He or she will act as a facilitator, asking questions, driving conversation, and keeping track of ideas on the board as they emerge and evolve.

HBS professors seldom lecture. Instead, they act primarily as conversation catalysts, facilitating discussion and learning. Though you learn a lot from the professors about their and others' research, it's the sharing of ideas and discussion among participants that's at the heart of the HBS learning methodology.

The primary reason for reading the case material the night before is to put everyone on an equal footing in their understanding of the company, industry, and protagonist's business problem. Once in the classroom, the professor will lead you through a discussion of the case. You will learn more if you come to class prepared to share your ideas and your experiences, and open to listening to your fellow participants as they share theirs.

If you're a little nervous the first couple of classes, that's very natural. The first time a professor teaches a new case,

or works with a new Executive Education group, he or she is nervous, too. I think you'll find that everyone in the room is in the same situation. The remedy is simple: By being willing to talk, to put yourself out there, you'll create a more relaxed, comfortable classroom environment. Our aim is to create a “safe learning environment” where participants can try out new ideas, take risks, and be willing to make mistakes in the name of greater learning.

HBS relies on participant-centered learning and the case method because it creates an active rather than a passive learning environment. When you come to one of our Executive Education programs, you're agreeing to a learning contract with your fellow participants and professors. By actively listening and freely sharing, you will learn as well as teach.

At HBS, we encourage people to raise their hands and be called upon before they speak. This prevents the potential chaos resulting from everyone talking at once. It also allows the professor to get as many people engaged in the conversation as possible, and to draw on diverse points of view during class.

So what happens if nobody talks? Professors here are very good at getting participants to share. Very often, if the class is quiet, the professors will do a “warm call.” They'll prearrange for a participant with experience in the industry of the case to share his or her knowledge or speak first. They will have approached that person well in advance and asked them to come prepared to speak. Professors are here to push everyone to learn, but not to embarrass anyone. Trust the process. The more open you are, the more willing you are to engage, the more the classroom comes alive.

In an effort to get the class into the mindset of the protagonists, professors will often encourage participants to take opposing sides in the case, and to debate or discuss the ideas as if they were the protagonists. Sometimes professors will ask participants to role-play, to put themselves in the shoes of the people in the case. If you're uncomfortable in this kind of situation, ask for help from your learning group. Touch base with the professor beforehand. Professors are pretty good at reading the room and being sensitive to individuals' needs.

Another technique professors use to read the room and to encourage dialogue is to ask for a vote. A professor will ask you to take sides, to formally choose an option for how you might solve the problem. Voting creates a powerful dynamic. By forcing you to take sides, you become more deeply aligned with one side or the other. That engagement drives learning. Just like in real life, as the discussion continues, you'll find yourself struggling to defend your position.

If professors have handouts, they'll generally wait until the end of class to give them out. Why? So you and everyone else

stay engaged in the conversation. They also don't want to summarize too early. Who, after all, hasn't flipped ahead in a presentation? If you don't have the materials in hand, it's a lot harder to get out of sync with the class.

The goal of all of these efforts is to improve your processes of analysis and decision making in situations of ambiguity, time pressure, and limited information—an attempt to replicate exactly what executives face every day in the workplace. What actually happened in a particular case is less relevant because outcomes are the result of effective strategy and effective execution, but also luck. Good strategies and good execution can get derailed by unexpected events. The reverse is true as well. So we try to draw lessons that go beyond the actual outcome of a case.

There you have it: the HBS classroom in a nutshell. Remember, to get the most out of class, come prepared, having read and analyzed the case. Be ready and willing to share your ideas and to take risks. Most important, be really open to listen and learn from the collective experience and wisdom in the room. We're able to attract wonderful participants to our programs. In the end, they'll be some of your most effective teachers.

And now relax. Take a deep breath. Prepare to laugh, learn, and enjoy the wonderfully stimulating classroom environment of Harvard Business School.

## HBS Learning Best Practices

---

**Prepare.** Not only is a thorough, individual preparation of each case a great learning experience, it's a key to being an active participant in the case discussion.

**Discuss the case with others before class.** As mentioned earlier, this will refine your reasoning. It's not cheating; it's encouraging. However, you will be cheating yourself if you don't prepare thoroughly before such discussions.

**Participate.** In class, actively express your views and challenge others. Discussion-based learning may seem contrary to how you have learned in other settings. But when you express your views to others, you commit yourself, which, in turn, gets you involved.

**Share your related experience.** During class, if you are aware of a situation that relates to the topic being discussed and it would enrich the discussion, share it. So-called "war" stories heighten the relevance of the classroom.

**Constantly relate the topic and case at hand to your business.** No matter how remote the connection seems at first, don't tune out because the content seems unrelated to your business. You can learn a lot about marketing insurance from a case on marketing razor blades, and vice versa.

**Actively apply what you are learning to your own specific management situations, past and future.** That will greatly heighten relevance. Even better is to pick a situation that you know you will face in the future where you could productively use some good ideas. For example, how can I grow my business? Make note of each good idea from the discussion. Not only will these ideas improve the outcome of the situation, they will stick in your mind forever, because they were learned in the context of something important to you.

**Note what clicks.** Different people with different backgrounds, experiences, skills, and styles will take different things out of the discussions. Your notes will appropriately be quite different from those of your neighbors.

**Mix it up.** Use the discussion as an opportunity to discover intriguing people with different points of view. Get to know them outside of class and continue your learning there.

**Try to better understand and enhance your own management style.** By hearing so many other approaches to a given situation you will be exposed to many styles and thereby understand your own. This understanding will put you in a better position to improve it.

**Work hard, play hard.** Although our programs are a lot of work, they are also a lot of fun. Participants report that the greatest benefit of coming to a program is that you meet remarkable people . . . and make lifelong friends. Come with an open mind and prepare for a transformational experience.



## More Information

---

Additional information on the case-learning model and individual Harvard Business School Executive Education programs can be found at [www.exed.hbs.edu](http://www.exed.hbs.edu).

Text portions of this resource were compiled from John S. Hammond, "Learning by the Case Method," Harvard Business School Note 9-376-241, April 2002, and Stacy Childress, "Discussion Groups: An Integral Part of Case Method Learning at Harvard Business School," Executive Education, July 2001. The resource was developed by Tom Ryder and David A. Garvin.