

# Making learning closer to reality

**Caroline D Ditlev-Simonsen** describes how to develop a 'reality-case' and bring learning a step closer to reality



**W**ill studying books by famous chefs make you a great cook? Certainly it will help but to be a successful cook, kitchen experience is necessary. This might also be the case for business and management students. To succeed in the business world, studying books on theory and research is not enough.

But giving a business student the opportunity to work as a manager in a company is more complicated than giving a cooking student an opportunity for hands-on experience. Thus, case studies, role-play, dilemma training, hands-on-learning, and guest lectures by leaders and managers are popular teaching tools in business schools.

*“Reality-learning”* is a step closer to at-work experiential learning. It combines several of the teaching methods mentioned above: case studies, dilemma training and guest lectures. But it also presents a digitisation of case teaching through video communications with managers.

Students are introduced to dilemmas and situations that require actions and must make decisions about how they would act in similar situations. Thereafter, the managers – the people who actually made the decisions – tell the students what they actually did and why.

Following is a step-by-step process describes how to develop a reality-case and share the experiences .



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### **Identify a good case**

A good case should be from real life and focus on a specific incident with a before-and-after situation. Ideally, choose an event that has been in the media so that press clippings can be a part of the reading material. This makes the case study more relevant and engaging and students become curious about what the company was thinking at the time through managers' reflections – “back-stage” information.

The more the students know about the case, for example through media, and the more compelling the case is, the faster and easier it is for students to familiarise themselves with it. It also makes the case study more exciting and engaging.

However, to avoid students preparing the case in advance, make sure that students do not receive materials prior to the lesson or get to know what the case study entails. The optimal case is about an incident or challenge the students are aware of but not familiar with.

### **Identify the key person and establish contact**

Establish contact with a key person involved in the incident that the case study will be about. This is perhaps the biggest challenge. Not everyone wants to describe and share his or her experiences from an incident or process. Therefore it is important to make a setting that the individual is comfortable with. Including more people is possible but can easily become too extensive. Initially it is recommended to use one person as a main character .



### Example of reality-learning

In 2011 Altor, a large investment fund focusing on buyouts, bought and merged a number of small waste management companies. The result was Norsk Gjenvinning AS (NG). Today, NG is one of Norway's largest waste management companies with about 1,500 employees.

Erik Osmundsen was the first CEO of NG. This reality-case goes through key issues in the communication process for Osmundsen when he started at NG.

What should be the company's key values, and how should they be communicated? How should the company address scandals when employees are caught in corruption or illegally dumping waste?

Students receive materials and facts about these issues and discussion questions are provided. This company's initiatives have received a lot of media coverage, which makes the case more challenging and reality oriented. The students are shown videos of the NG CEO answering the same questions as the students. This is a "four-chapter" reality-case, in which we learn about the results of the CEO's decisions as well as new and unexpected incidents that occur during a period of about three years.

### Develop the written case material, including the challenge and questions

Describe the background for the case study in a text. Address why this case study is interesting and relevant for teaching purposes. In about two pages, describe the industry, then provide facts about the company such as turnover, number of employees, and so on as well as the competitors and challenges the company faces.

To start, students should read the materials in class. The text must describe the precursor to the situation that the case study covers. The text ends with a question to students on how they would behave if they were the CEO.

Students receive a few minutes to decide what they would do in the situation. They then discuss the scenario in groups of three or four and produce an answer that describes how they would have acted. While students are working, the question is visible on a screen.

### The manager's response to the situation

Managers receive the same questions as the student. The answer from the manager is filmed, then presented on screen in class. The manager elaborates on what he or she actually did in the situation in two to three minutes. Students jointly discuss the manager's answers in relation to their own recommendation.

### Next step

Students then get two new pages that describe the result of the manager's decision. The text ends with questions to the students on what to do next. Again, the students get about 10-15 minutes to read the hand-out material then decide what they would do as the manager. In their discussion groups students answer each of the questions. The questions are visible on screen as students work.

The company manager's filmed answers to the questions discussed then again appear on the screen. The manager uses a few minute to answer to each of the questions presented and elaborates on what he or she actually did in these situations and shares the results. The class jointly discuss the manager's replies in relation to their own recommendation.



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### Experiences and advice

A *reality-case* can be very effective by including only one manager. It can also be extended by involving additional relevant employees.

It is important that the manager to be interviewed gets the material, including the questions, well in advance of the interview so the manager has time to prepare.

The company might have its own movie clips, such as promotional films, that can be useful to make students tune in (sometimes clips that the company is not aware of – are found on, for example, YouTube).

Media coverage related to the company and case is also useful. Such snippets included in the reading text makes the case more engaging and “real”.

It is important to make an agreement with the manager on where and how the case study will be used. This decision should be outlined in advance but depending on the questions and answers can be revised afterwards. The manager must approve the use of the case and a simple contract needs to be drafted.

A *reality-case* is an extended version of more standard teaching. The person who developed and managed the case, including producing the film or attending the production, has a more thorough understanding of the case. This extended knowledge can be an important for class contributions.

This individual also “owns” the copyright of the *reality-learning* case. Still, if the case is suitable and the producer approves, *reality-learning* cases might be suitable for use by other lecturers.

I have tested the *reality-learning* method several times in executive education programmes and received very positive responses with common feedback such as “This is the way to teach in business schools,” “Very engaging” and “Great learning experience”.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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