



TAPMI NURTURING WEALTH CREATOR SERIES

The Narratives in Cases for Management Education

by Jaba Gupta

I read an interesting case recently about a Napa Valley wine producer who had to decide whether to pick the grapes in his vineyard early or let a warm storm hit the region bringing with it the possibility of sweet red wine. Perhaps it was the romance of the warm storm and sweet red wine that drew my attention ...or the narrative intricately woven through the real and the possible worlds that held me captive.

The case studies in Management education have the same power to involve our minds, provided the narrative comes alive to us. A case tells the story of an organisation at a point in time. The organisation has a background - a past, an orientation towards the future (goal/s) and a present, which brings us to the moment of the story. The plot involves the key people in the organisation, who are engaged in the action plan in order to achieve the goal/s. The decision-maker is the tragic hero: like the winery-owner he ponders the issue - to pick or not to pick. Conflict is at the heart of the organisational narrative: an urgent goal that has to be achieved within a time frame and a persistent problem.

The case is more fascinating than a ready-made story because it is still evolving. The narrative acquires different shades of reality through case discussions in the classroom and students learn important lessons in creative problem solving. The analysis of the problem offers alternatives that would otherwise remain unexplored. The transformative power of the narrative holds immense potential to change our view of a problem and generate possible solutions.

The narrative approach provides the opportunity to explore multiple perspectives. Rather than be

swayed by the views of one character, the analyst may take an objective approach and distance himself/herself from the scene. What if our Napa valley farmer were to meet an all-knowing fortune-teller who would tell him whether the welcome storm would hit or not? That would really make life so much easier, wouldn't it?! But in its absence our hero would weigh the pros and cons of his choice objectively and plant a decision tree.

Clearly, this exercise in detachment is necessary to solve current problems in organisational and personal life situations. Action should be backed by logic. What if the Napa valley owner waited for the warm storm to hit and it never did? Imagine he has a niece who can give him definite scientific evidence of low pressure and high pressure cycles that can tell him the storm will come to his life, would he be willing to pay for that information?

If yes, then the next question is: how much is the rich wine-producer uncle willing to shell out of his thick wallet? That is logical action for you!

Recent research shows that storytelling is one of the most effective tools leaders can use in organisations. Once the placements are over, the much sought-after MBA degree is in the bag, the student is suddenly in the position of the Napa Valley decision maker him/herself. While every problem-situation is like a fingerprint and finding a solution is by no means an easy task, a narrative approach can generate multiple options for the decision-maker and suggest unlimited possibilities.

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