

Business as unusual

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Macbeth could teach you a thing or two about leadership skills, canvases might teach you about the importance of price transparency and the Sourav Ganguly-Greg Chappell spat might give you a lesson on team building. Businesses are changing rapidly and so are business schools. Today, case studies are being increasingly drawn from fields other than business.

A recent entrant to the list of offbeat case studies at B-schools is saffrontart.com, which has made it to Harvard Business School. Its business plan was made during co-founder Minal Vazirani's MBA at Insead in France. Explains Minal, "The market lacked transparency and the prices were not usually disclosed. We thought there was a need to look at this afresh. So, we did our bit and it worked."

Work it sure did. In February this year, the Vaziranis walked into a class at Harvard, with Bollywood number chaiya, chaiya from Mani Ratnam's Dil Se playing to welcome them. "It was a fascinating experience," admits Minal. The case is being used to demonstrate "managing innovation" at the workplace.

B-schools are drawing parallels from real-life people and situations to give students an extra edge. Take, for example, Rajeshwar Upadhyay, who is part of the visiting faculty at Hyderabad's Indian School of Business (ISB) and Thunderbird: The Garvin School of International Management at Arizona. His programme 'Management lessons from the world of literature' uses characters from literature to demonstrate leadership skills. The classes start with chapters on the Ramayana and the Odyssey and go on to cover the works of Bacon, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Emerson. Savita Mahajan, an associate dean at ISB, says that the student-response has been good in Upadhyay's class.

For Upadhyay, it's the simple logic of drawing comparisons between characters from literature and applying them to today's times. "Take, for example, Macbeth, his leadership was flawed. His self-obsession and over ambition led to his doom. Hamlet's case can easily relate to the Indian psyche of constantly getting into nuances of things. I have found these metaphors powerful. Often a comprehensive framework for practical applications is a consequence of this multi-pronged approach," he says.

It's not just art and literature, even the world of sports doesn't lag in giving students an edge in understanding business and leadership better. The SP Jain Institute of Management and Research in Mumbai not too long back offered its students a case study called Indian Cricket Saga. The study authored by Suresh G Lalwani and Lata Dhir was used to draw parallels between performance on the cricket field and in the corporate sector with focus on team dynamics, change in leadership and conflict management.

Explains Lalwani, "When you draw parallels from real life situations, it's easier to relate to it. This case can be used to demonstrate the importance of team spirit and leadership issues." Harish Bijoor, CEO, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc, agrees that offbeat case studies have become an interesting addition at business schools. "Out of the box ideas always click. So yes, if it's for

training at B-schools as well, why not? In the end it's contextuality that matters. Sadly, there haven't been too many Indian case studies but the ones that are around, I think, always have that extra edge simply because you can relate to them better."

And if arts and cricket have made it to case studies, can Indian movies be far behind?

The making of the 2006 blockbuster Krrish was taught in major B-schools in India and abroad as a case study. The film selected by the Indian Institute of Management-Indore in collaboration with Asia Case Research Center, University of Hong Kong, was chosen to be taught in B-schools across Europe, Asia and Latin and North America.

In fact, Indian movies have been interesting B-schools for the past few years. The trend started with Aamir Khan starrer Lagaan, which was used by IIM-Indore as a teaching aid in its module on leadership. IIM- Ahmedabad reached out to national award winning director Madhur Bhandarkar for making a case study on his film Corporate. The man behind the idea, Tejas A Desai of IIM-Ahmedabad is writing a paper on how movies like Guru and Corporate are relevant to today's times. He explains, "Guru was a movie that looked at India while it was undergoing a huge change. There are lessons to be learnt from how Gurukant Desai dealt with socialism at that time. Corporate looks at corporate India and how people at the top can sometimes make things difficult for others. There are management lessons there."

Ishan Gupta, who is pursuing his MBA from Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, agrees. "An interesting case study provides a detailed description of the world, encourages meaningful discussion among the participants and makes a student aware about a problem he may not have thought about before."

However, what makes offbeat case studies special is that they make you think out of the box. Anurag Jain, president, Perot Systems Consulting and Applications Solutions, and Insurance and Business Process Solutions, who holds an MBA from the University of Michigan, remembers quite a few offbeat case studies. He says, "Each one encouraged us to look at the business issue in a different dimension, challenging us to look for innovative responses."

A good case study, Jain says, should combine great presentation and backup material with a business case that allows the student to approach the issue from multiple angles. He adds, "It should encourage us to get out of our myopic or pre-conceived notions." Says Sanjeev Bikhchandani, CEO, Naukri.com, "Any real life business situation set in a relevant context, with an intriguing business decision, written well would make a good case study."

While most offbeat case studies are interesting, the ones written in the Indian context help students to grasp the case better, agree corporates and professors alike. Says Bikhchandani, "While concepts can be learnt through a case study written about any country, you also need to understand the context in which a business operates. Indian case studies for Indian students, who are going to go on to work in India, are important for contextual familiarity."

Praveen K Pasricha, director, Quality Growth Services and a six sigma trainer, says, "At least 50% of the case studies should be from Indian situations. This not only makes students feel comfortable, but also prepares them to face similar situations, which are likely to occur in their stint as managers as history repeats itself."

Jain sums by saying, "Case studies should as much be about the status quo as they should be about the future and aid in shaping the vision and the leadership of the students."