

International Business Cases: A Framework for Classroom Discussion

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The paper presents a framework for systematically analyzing international business cases in ways that engender effective classroom case discussions. It provides topic areas on which the reader may compile information. These topic areas are specially organized so that the reader may clearly infer the special relationship among the important facts of the case. It enables him to look for vital information and to disregard the unimportant information. It enables him to develop strategic perspectives of the firm's headquarters and its foreign subsidiaries. It also enables him to think and debate on his feet, with all the important facts clearly organized and at his fingertips. The framework provides him the total picture at one glance. It helps him to relate theory to the case. The framework is meant to help him to effectively prepare for classroom case discussion.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is written out of interest in the quality of the preparation for classroom discussion of a case. The major motivations of this paper are: (1) how to help students to actively read: sorting information (important from unimportant), organizing information, thinking strategically - beyond the "story" of the case; (2) how to relate the theory to the case; (3) how to develop the big picture (and not get lost in details); (4) how to present a case; and (5) how to effectively engage in a meaningful debate and discuss the case, with all important information clearly organized and available to the participant "at a glance."

The framework, which has two pages and is presented at the end of this paper, is meant to help the student to use it for more effective use of his skills of organization and discussion. It generates an interdisciplinary approach; and the major functional managements (e.g. marketing, finance, production) are analyzed. A general management approach is adopted: how the strategies of functional managements may be integrated for corporate strategy.

This framework is the culmination of decades of the author's experimenting with the case method, and therefore, there are no references at the end of this paper.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM CASE DISCUSSIONS

It is important to review some of the ingredients of preparation that help in good classroom case discussions. They are: analytical skills; grasp of interrelated issues; ability to see and recall the (a) overview, (b) relationship of the case to concepts, (c) problem as whole, (d) critical quantitative and qualitative information from the case narrative, and (e) the willingness and capacity to think and debate on one's feet in classroom discussion.

For case preparation at home the paper suggests a framework for sorting critical information in an analytical method that would aid in effective and spontaneous debate in the classroom. The framework, when completed by the student, becomes a source to him to participate and to come up with newer arguments for rebutting other students' arguments.

Further, the framework disciplines the reader to think analytically while studying cases in a manner to keep his mind open for a variety of solutions to problems - whether or not he is currently aware of the problems or of the possible solutions. He may become aware of them at a later time, e.g. during class discussions.

The framework is applicable to an international or global company with foreign units in at least several countries. It helps the reader of a case to develop a profile of the firm at (a) the overall corporate and global level (see page 1 of the framework), and, (b) foreign units level, unit-by-unit (see page 2 of the framework).

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of the paper is to provide a comprehensive framework for assisting the reader to compile the major factors of the case so that the framework becomes a basis for the student's effective impromptu classroom discussion.

PURPOSE OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework draws attention to the reader about possible major issues that could be relevant to the case. It also induces the reader to be organized in his mind at the time of compiling important information after sifting it from the narrative of the case. In so doing the reader reads quickly to identify the important from the unimportant. In effect, he is not lulled by the "story" part of the case, but, instead he is kept alert by his seeking out important data and information, rather like a police detective. He does not (and should not) pre-judge the diagnosis until all of the case factors are fully compiled, like the open-minded, objective detective should not pre-judge the outcome of the investigation until all of the data is completed, analyzed and interpreted.

THE FRAMEWORK

As it has been pointed out, the framework is presented at the end. The first page is for the overview of the international/global firm. The second page is for the foreign unit (one page for each foreign unit).

The framework adopts a strategic emphasis in the analyses of the case, allowing focus on a limited range of issues, e.g. marketing problems, product re-design challenges, new emerging market opportunities. The focus on strategy is in the right-most column of each of the two pages. It focuses the reader to relate specific problem areas to the overall strategic aspects. Also, it focuses upon external and internal issues for the firm as a whole, and, for each of the firm's foreign units.

Some columns may be filled; and a few, not filled at all if certain aspects are not relevant to the case. Besides, a case can only contain limited information, and so, on many issues there might not be much information available. The reader can leave such columns blank - or he may make educated assumptions and jot these down in different colored ink.

Page 1 of the Framework: Global Analyses

It highlights the topics that makes the reader look for important external global factors, and, internal organizational factors to arrive at the firm's overall corporate strategy (both, as it is, and, as it should be).

External analyses looks at major trends in industry, competitor activities, market trends, new product and countries' opportunities and threats, and relative degree of risks involved (economic, political economic) for possible pursuit of each potential opportunity of new product(s) and new countries.

Organizational analyses focuses on strengths-weakness profile of the firm compared to comparable firms with similar product range, market share, scope of market and organizational resources. The firm's organizational profile provides a good basis of strategic thrusts. The quality of leadership at the top for the overall firm and for each foreign unit generates the picture of future organizational capability.

Page 2 of the Framework: Firm's Foreign Unit and Its Host Country Analyses

This page provides similar analyses as page 1, but at a lesser degree of scope. Its focus is the foreign unit, be it a wholly or partially owned subsidiary unit or a joint venture. The host country analysis focuses on local risks (political, economic, competitive, legal, etc.). Local culture of the host country is important for marketing and manufacturing of the products. Domestic and foreign competitors become relevant in such analyses because they provide a good indication of the unit's strategic thrusts. Local industry trends may provide new ideas for the unit for its future.

Foreign unit's organizational analyses emphasizes the need to evaluate the unit organization-host country environment fit in the sense of match between the profiles of (1) the strengths-weakness of the unit and (2) the opportunities-threats of the host country environment. Further, the strengths-weakness profile of the foreign unit organization may be compared with those of domestic and foreign competitors operating in the host country. This comparative analyses may be done from whatever information is directly available from the case, or, indirectly inferred from the decisions of the players in the case. And the class discussions may argue the plausibility of the assumptions.

From the analyses of the foreign unit's host country analyses and its organizational analyses, the reader may construe what the unit's strategy is in the host country. It may be wise to evaluate the current strategy of the unit. It may be prudent to assess the quality of leadership of the unit's top, middle and lower management and supervisors in the management of the unit strategy. The quality of organizational culture and of the human resource area would have a strong bearing upon the effective accomplishment of unit objectives and goals.

Together with the leadership of the unit and its organizational culture, a relevant linkage to examine is the nature of relationship between the firm's global headquarters and the foreign unit. The degree of decentralization and "freedom" to develop specific strategies, organizational culture and management styles to the unit's level would be encouraging. For enlightened corporate global leaders select high quality leaders for their foreign units and set them free.

CONCLUSION

The framework helps to evaluate the international business cases in the context of the headquarters of a global firm and its foreign units. The framework induces strategic thinking along clear, systematic and organized lines. It aids the reader to look for vital information from the unimportant details. It provides a complete picture at a glance to the participant during classroom case discussions. It helps him to think on his/her feet, and, engage in healthy discussions on issues or angles that he had not earlier anticipated, with important information at her or his fingertips. The framework induces him to be very analytical in thinking and very succinct and effective in speaking in classroom case discussions.

It is important to also conclude that articulate participants must possess conceptual insight. He must relate the important aspects of theory to the case at hand. And, he should so discuss the benefits as well as the shortcomings of the theory or specific concepts as they might not fully explain many issues in the case. The framework generates a systematic configuration of firm-specific data/information that should enable him to do that effectively.

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CASES: Framework for Class Discussion

Please write brief phrases for only the more important factors of the case.

GLOBAL ANALYSES:

1. Firm's External Environments:

- (a) New global/regional challenges
- (b) Opportunities
 - new products
 - new countries

- (c) Industry/mkt. trends
- (d) Global competitor strategies
- (e) Nature of risks: political, economic

(b) How does it meet with needs of #1 & 2 (see left)?

(c) How should it be changed? Why?

(d) Concepts applicable to this case:

2. Organizational Analysis

- (a) Strengths-weakness profile (compared to comparable global/regional competitors)

- (b) Product/business/organizational profile

- (c) Global/foreign units' leadership capabilities

FIRM'S FOREIGN UNIT AND ITS HOST COUNTRY ANALYSES

4. Foreign Unit's Host Country Analyses:				
(a) Political, economic risks	(b) Local culture	(c) Local industry	(d) Local mkt, labor, supplier factors	(e) Domestic & foreign competitors
6. Foreign Unit's Strategy: (a) Main thrusts are:				
(b) How does it meet with the needs of #4&5?				
(c) How should it be changed? Why?				
7. Nature of relationship be-				
5. Foreign Unit's Organizational Analyses:				
(a) Strength-weakness profile (compared to others in the host country)	(b) Product/business organizational profile	(c) Unit's top, middle, lower leadership	(d) Unit's human resource profile & organizational culture	

tween firm's headquarters
and the foreign unit
