

# How Do People Learn Best?

Use real-life scenarios to turn learning into a more powerful engine BY DENNIS BAKKE



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**T**op MBA programs don't load their students down with books of rules and abstract theories that may or may not have any bearing on the real world. Instead, their central tool is the case study method: real-life examples with all the complicated push and pull of the actual business world. Case study learning puts the next generation of leaders in the driver's seat with skin in the game as they work to answer the foundational question in business education: how would you make this decision?

Case study learning is the best tool in business education. The only place people learn better is the real world itself. But out in the real world, few leaders make use of the incredible opportunities that real-life cases of day-to-day business offer their team members to learn and develop. That's because, in most organizations, a handful of leaders make the vast majority of decisions. After all, isn't that a leader's job?

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But when leaders make all the decisions, those decisions aren't always the best. Leaders aren't closest to most situations. They don't always understand all of the factors and personalities at play. They aren't the most affected by the consequences. When leaders make all the decisions, the organization loses a great deal of the perspective and creativity of the people who understand the situation best. Perhaps even more important, when leaders make all the decisions, the organization misses out on the opportunity to develop team members through on-the-job, skin-in-the-game, case study learning.

During my tenure as co-founder and CEO of AES, a Fortune 200 global power company, and then as co-founder of Imagine Schools, one of the largest nonprofit charter school networks in the U.S., we pioneered pushing decision-making down deep into the organization. The approach served as a massive learning and development initiative. We didn't just pass off decisions to people and then leave them unsupported. We implemented all the best elements of the case study method into our day-to-day business. As a result, we developed leaders and experts at all levels of our organization.

Our crucial tool for learning and development is the decision-maker process. It's based on a set of basic assumptions about our people: that they're unique, creative thinkers who like a challenge, want to contribute and are able to learn. But it's got one more assumption: they're also fallible. That's true of everyone in the organization, both leaders and team members. Just because you're on top doesn't mean you can't make mistakes. And in the decision-maker model, leaders still lead. Here's what it looks like:

- The leader chooses someone to make a key decision.
- The decision-maker seeks advice — including from the leader — to gather information.
- The final decision is made not by the leader, but by the chosen decision-maker.

The real learning and development begins during the advice process, which requires the decision-maker to seek out people who have had experience with similar issues. It also requires that the decision-maker consult people in different positions, because people see different things from different perspectives. The decision-maker asks a leader, a peer, someone who works in a position below him or her in the hierarchy — and if circumstances warrant, experts from outside the company. In the process, the decision-maker becomes an expert on the issue, and not only does the individual develop personal skills, but a deep bench of experts and leaders are created.

Dixie Benny, senior organizational development consultant at Providence Health & Services, said “on-the-job learning, with experienced leaders teaching leaders, is the single most effective approach to increase leadership capability. We dramatically boost productivity and employee engagement by supportively enabling decision-making at the lowest possible level in the organization. The result is a flexible, nimble organization poised to respond quickly to rapidly changing business conditions.”

The decision-maker approach creates a culture of learning that turns the organization into a more powerful engine of education than the top business programs in the world. It uses the same tools those programs do, but with a crucial advantage no business school can provide: the all-important context of real consequences in real life. [CLO](#)