

Time to talk things over

A V VEDPURISWAR

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Ideally, classroom discussions encourage the profitable exchange of knowledge and impressions. They can also get tricky. Heavy-handed discipline can sink a debate, while the lack of any can prove as bad. AV Vedpuriswar highlights a few points. In an earlier article in the *The Learning Curve* (April 30, 01), I had written about classroom discussion being the most effective form of handling a case. But conducting a case discussion can be a tricky exercise for someone who is new to this method of teaching. In this article I shall try to explain some of the issues involved, however, these are only broad guidelines. The most important requirement of a case discussion is that it must be student-driven. The basic premise of the case method is that people learn the most when they actively participate in the discussion. The students must take centre stage and the instructor must remain in the background. To make case discussions effective, a few ground rules need to be observed. Compulsory attendance is a must, since unlike lectures “ where one can borrow notes from a classmate ” one has to be there to understand what is going on. Also, coming late to class should be discouraged as this upsets the rhythm of the class. Most importantly, students should come well prepared to the class and do most of the talking. One way to facilitate this is to award marks for class participation. The instructor’s role is to facilitate the discussion. If he puts forward his views right at the beginning of the class, the discussion is doomed. On the other hand, by raising issues and encouraging the students to air their views freely and frankly, he can help maintain the momentum. This is not to suggest that the instructor should be a silent spectator when there is a free-for-all in the classroom. The instructor’s job is to maintain discipline in the class, but to do so without any heavy-handedness as this may inhibit the students. Generally, an instructor needs to pull up students only in two circumstances ” one, when they talk out of context and break the flow while an important point is being discussed; two, when they make statements full of factual errors that clearly indicate inadequate preparation. A major challenge for the instructor, when many hands are going up, is to decide who should speak. This is clearly a matter of judgment and here the understanding that the instructor has of the students’ background and temperament becomes very important. The instructor should ask that student to speak, who he feels will take the discussion forward. A related point to note is that the teacher should not allow a few students to dominate the discussion. Broad-based participation by the students is the hallmark of a good discussion. The instructor should also let the class know, but in a subtle way, who is making a positive contribution and who is not. One way to punish students who have the habit of digressing from the point being discussed is not to allow them to speak. Similarly, if a student makes an illogical or unreasonable statement, inconsistent with the facts of the case, the instructor can sideline him, not by a direct attack, but by seeking the opinion of other students. A question like “Do you think he’s right?” can evoke expressions of indignation from other students and put the erring student in his place. Another tricky issue that a case instructor faces is handling doubts/ clarifications. As far as possible, students who seek clarifications should be advised to contact the instructor before the class. If the teacher is requested to clear doubts in the classroom, he may find himself getting drawn into the discussion. A good way of handling such a situation is to ask other students to clear these doubts. The instructor, even while maintaining discipline, can demonstrate his concern for the students in various ways. Statements like, I know Anish wanted to speak in the earlier class, but could not get a chance. I now invite him to make the opening remarks, show genuine concern for the students. The teacher also has the crucial role of integrating the different

ideas put forward by the students. The way the instructor assimilates and processes these ideas will have a major impact on the quality of the discussion. To facilitate this, all important points should be written on the board in a proper format. At the same time, it should not look cluttered as students typically tend to look at the board for feedback. So, the instructor should record only the main themes on the board. In the last 10-15 minutes, the instructor has to sum up the discussion. In addition to a quick summary of what transpired in the class, the instructor should also point out some issues (at least one), which the class has overlooked. This is a good way of conveying to the students that the instructor still has a thing or two to teach them!

(The author is the dean of ITUC School of Management, an affiliate of ICFAI)