Section 4. Questioning, Listening, and Responding: The Key Skill Requirements

Case

Assistant Professor Graham and Ms. Macomber (A)

Professor Charles Graham glanced at the clock on his left. The hands on the wall were not encouraging. One hour and ten minutes into the class—only ten minutes to go—and the discussion had gone nowhere. Charles reluctantly concluded he would have to exercise the basic dictatorial prerogative of any instructor: he would have to tell the class how wrong they were.

Charles was starting out his second year of teaching and, as he told his New Dominion faculty colleagues, he had developed a sincere commitment to the case discussion teaching methods and philosophy. Charles was in his second week of teaching Quantitative Analysis and Operations Management (QAOM). He wanted to give that class every chance, but he had not foreseen that 80 intelligent persons might, individually and jointly, entirely miss the main point of the case. Charles disapproved of the practice of giving a pat "answer" to a case at the end of class; on the other hand, he could not conscientiously allow 80 apprentice managers to leave class thinking that the last hour passed for an adequate case analysis. Charles drew a slow breath; one more comment, he thought, and then they are in for it.

The hand Charles recognized was in the back row: it belonged to one of the women students, Janet Macomber. Janet was one of the younger students in the section, a graduate of the California Institute of Technology with an excellent academic record but with limited work experience. She looked nervous and started speaking softly and hesitantly. "Louder, please!" came from somewhere on the other side of the room.

Janet stopped, and started again in a stronger voice. "I'm sorry, but according to my analysis, the class's recommendations simply do not answer the company's problem—which is how to move work-in-process through the plant the best way possible."

"And just what is your analysis, Ms. Macomber?" Professor Graham asked.

"Well"—there was a note of apology in her voice—"when I was doing the case last night, I multiplied Exhibit 1 times Exhibit 2."

Charles did not want to appear amazed that someone had apparently cracked the case after all. He only wanted the class—each and every one of the other 79—to realize the import of Janet Macomber's words. He interrupted: "Let me understand, Ms. Macomber. You actually took Exhibit 1"—he held up the case opened to the exhibits—"and mul-

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tiplied every number in Exhibit 1 times a number in Exhibit 2?"

"Times the corresponding number. Yes, sir."

"And how long did that take you?" (Snickers came from the side of the room.)

Janet Macomber appeared to be taken aback at such a personal question. "Not too long," she answered, adding, as if to justify her computational binge, "I used a calculator."

"And what exactly did you have, after you multiplied every number in Exhibit 1 times a corresponding number in Exhibit 2?"

"I had a matrix of the dollar-volume flow between departments." Janet stopped. She was obviously uncomfortable and ready to relinquish the floor. But Charles was determined to expose her reasoning, bit by bit.

"And what did you find . . . from this matrix?"

"I found that the flows were not all the same [pause]. Some departments had a much greater flow of work-in-process between them than others."

"And what did you conclude based on this observation?"

"I concluded that . . . if I were laying out the plant . . . I would put the departments with the most flow between them next to each other, lining them up, and I would put the other departments on the sides, or in other buildings, if I had to."

"Well, well." Charles looked around. The clock on the wall showed that the class was already two minutes overtime. There would be no chance to take further comments from the class, and anyway it might be more salutary for each individual to mull singly over Janet Macomber’s analysis. So as not to end the class abruptly, Charles made a few extempore remarks about how this case was related to previous cases and to the course plan. He carefully refrained from passing judgment on Janet’s analysis or on the preceding case discussion. Let ’em figure it out themselves, he thought, now they have something to think about. All in all, Charles was quite pleased with the way the class had turned out.

As he was leaving the room, Charles noted a group clustered around Janet Macomber’s top row seat. There really is such a thing as section dynamics, he reflected. "When one of the class reasons through a case, everyone learns. This case method really works. What a break I had to start out my career teaching with cases; it sure is a lot more fun than lecturing."
"Well, well." Professor Graham's words rang in Janet Macomber's ears.

She slumped back in her chair, feeling like a defendant released from hostile cross-examination. The ordeal was over but the verdict was still out. Janet had been disturbed that the class discussion had followed such a different track than her own analysis. It had taken all the courage she could muster to suggest the class was wrong and assert her own point of view.

Janet listened carefully to Professor Graham's closing remarks. To her dismay, he said nothing to indicate her approach had been right—or wrong. Was it possible that she had been completely off base? Had she made a fool of herself in front of the whole section?

Class was dismissed, and in the minutes before the next class began, Janet was surrounded by her sectionmates. Their comments ranged from good natured teasing to open incredulity:

"You didn't really... How long did it... Hundreds of numbers... Let me see..." The capstone comment came from Peter Anderson, an already popular figure who usually sat with a group of cohorts in the middle of the right-hand bank of seats. "Janet, you really did it this time," he said, laughing. "We [indicating his colleagues] are going to call your achievement THE MACOMBER MEMORIAL MATRIX!"

Janet made a humorous reply, but inwardly she despaired. "Just what I don't need," she thought. "In the second week of school, to be typecast as a number-cruncher! I should be more careful in the future about sticking my neck out when I talk in class." She made a silent resolution: this won't happen again.
In the fifth week of the term, Professor Graham was going over his student class cards for first-year QAOM, tabulating notes on individual class participation. On the whole, the section’s case discussions were shaping up pretty well. Individually and collectively, the class had come a long way in five weeks. Charles grinned: he supposed that, if surveyed, the class would say the same of him.

Halfway through the pile, Charles stopped at Janet Macomber’s card. What, he wondered, is going on there?

In the first weeks of the term, Charles had marked Janet down as very promising. She had come to each class prepared and had participated eagerly in the discussions. Her comments had been intelligent, succinct, and to the point. And on that one occasion (Charles remembered with pleasure), Janet had performed an analytic tour de force, smashing the case wide open in the last minutes of the class.

Charles now counted the case as a watershed in the section’s development. He remembered the first hour and ten minutes of that class as everything a case discussion should not be: floundering, disjointed, indecisive, and entirely irrelevant to the company’s problems. Since that day, slowly but with increasing confidence, the section was pulling itself together and becoming (on good days) a working forum.

Janet Macomber’s behavior was in abrupt contrast to that of the rest of the class. Charles could not fix exactly when the change had taken place, but Janet had become silent, ceasing to take part voluntarily in case discussions. She had begun arriving late to class (QAOM had been meeting after lunch); she no longer took her characteristic back row seat, but changed her position almost every day—to the point that Charles could not be sure of how many classes she was attending. When Charles had seen her, she had generally seemed sleepy (or bored) and quite evidently had been barely following the discussion. Charles had refrained from calling on Janet unexpectedly on these occasions; he had a strong presupposition she would be unprepared and felt disinclined to embarrass her. Such tacit benevolence ought not continue, however.

“After such an auspicious start,” thought Professor Graham, “what can be causing Janet to act this way? And what—if anything—do I do about it?”

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