

A Task Force with Teeth?

Driving City Performance in Lawrence, MA

Practitioner Guide

JORRIT DE JONG AND LISA COX

Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “A Task Force with Teeth? Driving City Performance in Lawrence, MA.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants also have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopsis

After taking office, Mayor Daniel Rivera of Lawrence, Massachusetts, created a new task force to combat blight, a complex and far-reaching issue that impacted his city’s public health and safety, inequality, and real estate prices. On-the-ground progress, however, was elusive as the number of distressed properties was growing faster than the city could act to resolve them. Rivera seemed to have little confidence in his staff, but he endeavored to motivate the team. Creating a united task force from entrenched, disparate groups posed challenges. The case pushes participants and students to question: *Once a team has been formed and data has been collected, how does one use it across departments to address pressing problems effectively? How do you map out milestones toward solving a problem that will expedite the process and motivate a diverse team?*

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (20–30 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *What did Mayor Rivera do well?*
- *What would you do differently if you were in his position, and why?*

Part 2a: Diagnosing Collaborative Challenges (20–30 minutes)

This part of the discussion allows participants to analyze what the task force was accomplishing and why. It can be based on three simple questions:

- *What was the task force doing?*
- *Why were they doing it?*
- *How would they know if they were doing it well?*

Part 2b: Application (20 minutes)

If time allows, participants may break into groups to apply the concepts discussed to their own collaborative challenges. Re-purpose the three questions above:

- *What are you doing? What actual activities, actions, and/or interventions does your organization engage in?*
- *Why are you doing it? What is the organization hoping to accomplish through its work? What are the goals?*
- *How do you know you are doing it well? What would success look like? How is performance evaluated?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants will continue to reflect on and apply to collaborative challenges in their work. Some sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion:

- The key to innovative problem-solving is rethinking the problem and building capacity to innovate around it: collaborating, managing performance, and analyzing data are all key.
- Data and technology are necessary, but cities have much more data than they utilize, and technology does not need to be expensive.
- The most basic questions are the hardest to answer and rarely asked: What are we trying to accomplish, why, and how would we know we are effective in making progress?
- Getting better at innovative problem-solving starts with comprehensive self-assessment and identifying areas for growth. The tools are available—it takes leadership and a learning organization to use them!

Appendix

Optional Worksheet

Pre-discussion Questions:

1. *How did Mayor Rivera define success for the distressed properties task force?*

2. *How would you characterize the task force in terms of its composition and way of working? What aspects are familiar to you? What aspects surprised you?*

3. *What data did the mayor and the task force use to do the following?*
 - a. Identify, diagnose, and monitor the problem(s).

 - b. Manage performance of the task force and its members.

 - c. Engage with external stakeholders, including citizens.

4. *If you were in Mayor Rivera's position, what would your next step(s) have been towards improving the situation, and why? How would you have known if the task force's performance was improving?*