

The Sandwich Shop

Breaking Through Bureaucracy in Amsterdam

Practitioner Guide

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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, “The Sandwich Shop: Breaking Through Bureaucracy in Amsterdam.”

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. If you choose to use the worksheet as a basis for group discussion in the Application section below, 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

Tamer Akgün, a young businessman in Amsterdam, ran into so much red tape while trying to open a sandwich shop that he began to lose hope. The city had set up “one-stop shops” to assist entrepreneurs, but Akgün didn’t know about them, and those who did found them to be poorly coordinated and unhelpful, more focused on identifying obstacles than helping to overcome them.

Akgün’s plight was typical of that faced by many entrepreneurs, especially those from immigrant families like his. For Amsterdam City Manager Erik Gerritsen, Akgün’s case offered a chance to bring together department heads and other officials who work on permits and licenses and examine what happened, address any issues, and, most importantly, prevent these types of issues in the future.

Meeting in Akgün’s sandwich shop, still unopened two years after he rented the space, the officials from various departments and agencies all saw the situation from their own perspective, and some of them didn’t see a problem at all. Each official seemed to think they were simply doing their job by enforcing the rules. What was a way forward that would produce the best results for entrepreneurs like Akgün and the city at large?

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (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:

1. Do you think the city should have cared about the sandwich shop situation? Why, or why not?
2. If you think there was a problem, how would you define it?
3. Why do you think it was challenging for the city manager to get officials from different departments and other organizations to address the problem collaboratively?
4. If all involved organizations would have worked together and successfully addressed the problem(s), what public value would have been created and for whom?
5. If you were in the city manager’s position, what would you have done to accelerate change and create more public value for residents in this situation?

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to fill out the worksheet and then break into pairs or small groups to apply the “three very difficult, simple questions” to challenges in their own work.

- *What is the (real) problem?*
 - *What’s going on? What else is going on? What’s really going on? What’s below the surface of what may look like a red tape problem? At what level might we intervene to address the issue and improve the desired outcomes?*
- *What are we currently doing about this problem and why?*
 - If you’ve been offering the same solution for a while and things aren’t getting better, you may have misdiagnosed or insufficiently diagnosed a problem. Remember: Just because it worked somewhere else doesn’t mean it will work for you.
- *How do you know you’re doing it well?*
 - Unless you define what success looks like and come up with metrics, you won’t know if what you’re trying is going in the right direction. *What quantitative/qualitative data might tell you that your proposal is working or not?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants may continue to reflect on and apply to challenges in their work. Share the [slide deck](#) that includes the case’s epilogue.

High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Effective leaders diagnose a problem before trying to solve it. Just because a solution worked elsewhere doesn’t mean it will work for you.
- Even a seemingly “broken” system is producing results or value for someone. What seems broken to some might be working fine for others.
- Public leadership is about managing multiple and sometimes conflicting goals and interests, such as trying to produce value (or justice) for individuals and society at large.
- Use these three “very difficult, simple questions” as a starting point to help you diagnose problems in your organization before you move towards solutions.
 - What is the (real) problem?
 - What are you currently doing and why?
 - How do you know you are doing it well?

Worksheet

Work in pairs or small groups to apply the central concepts and lessons of the case towards correctly defining a problem in your city and implementing a solution.

1. *What is the (real) problem you're trying to solve?*
 - a. *Distinguish symptoms from underlying causes.*
 - b. *Acknowledge that different stakeholders may have different perspectives.*
 - c. *Articulate why the problem is a problem.*

2. *What are you currently doing about it and why?*
 - a. *What has been done to date, and has it worked?*
 - b. *What are the underlying assumptions in current efforts?*
 - c. *Have these assumptions been tested?*

3. *How do you know you are doing it well?*
 - a. *What would success in solving the problem look like?*
 - b. *What metrics would tell you if you're moving in the right direction?*
 - c. *What else might tell you you're making progress?*