

The “Bilbao Effect”

The Collaborative Architecture That Powered Bilbao’s Urban Revival

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 ‘Bilbao Effect.’”

Role of Facilitator

The facilitator leads the 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 worksheets 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

In 2018, Bilbao was presented with the Best European City award, adding the prize to a long list the Spanish city had collected since the mid-2000s. The City’s success was often attributed to the Guggenheim museum, giving name to the “Guggenheim effect.” This was based on a fairly shallow assessment of the City’s transformation. In fact, the building blocks of Bilbao’s transformation are found in the collaborative efforts established by government entities during the 1990s, in the context of a deep economic, political, and social crisis.

The analysis centers on how collaborative building blocks and leadership styles enabled the City’s transformation and whether these factors also provided a solid foundation for its future. This retrospective exploration will focus on the context (crisis, necessity, and interdependence), design (governance mechanism, composition, decision rules, etc.), management (interaction between political and technical leadership, value creation versus value distribution, trust building, etc.), and leadership (decisions in the face of challenges, attitudes towards sharing credit, confidence in the vision, different leadership styles for different moments, etc.) of the collaboration.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (30 minutes)

Begin by asking if someone will volunteer to summarize facts of the case and the question facing the reader, without stating their opinions. The goal here is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *Who would you credit with the successful revitalization of Bilbao, and why?*
- *What were critical moments and actions in the process of developing and implementing the revitalization strategy?*
- *How did these moments or actions contribute to the outcome?*

Introduce the general question raised by the case:

- *How did the leadership approaches of the four consecutive mayors differ, and what can we learn about the effects of different leadership styles?*
- *When and under what circumstances is a collaborative governance approach necessary or desirable? What are critical factors for success?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group applying the central question of the case to the challenges and choices they face in their own professional lives.

- *In your career, when you have seen or exercised effective leadership? What were the key actions or choices that made it effective?*
- *When is a collaborative approach necessary? How do you know?*
- *What, in your experience, have been barriers to effective collaboration? What has worked to remove those barriers and facilitate better collaboration?*

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 challenges in their work. High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- For collaborations to work, it is important to assess whether stakeholders share a vision of the problem and the need for collaboration.
- Leaders and people matter, but so does the design of the collaboration.
- Collaborative governance requires a broad repertoire of leadership behaviors, organizational capabilities, and continuous strategic adjustment.
- Different leadership styles may be needed for different times.

