From the Editor

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Crystal Ball Questions and Assumptions of Knowledge

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ANNOUNCER:

(COLD) Once again we present "Our Gal Sunday"...the story of an orphan girl named Sunday...from the little mining town of Silver Creek, Colorado. Who in young womanhood married England's richest, most handsome lord...Lord Henry Brinthrope. The story that asks the question...Can this girl from a little mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?

Try listening for a few minutes at: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s2/radio/day/1145am.html

Some of you may remember hearing "Our Gal Sunday" on the radio or hearing older relatives reminisce about it and other entertaining remnants of the good ol' days, such as burning leaves in the backyard and playing stickball in the street. By the way, these are the same relatives who walked to school in the snow barefoot, uphill both ways. Those days are over, thankfully, but Our Gal Sunday survives with a new name: Our Casewriter in a Hurry…the story of a casewriter from a little school in the East (or West) who has a story to tell…overcome with enthusiasm for the case form, our Casewriter begins to write and write and write until…the daunting Instructor's Manual looms ahead.

This story asks the question…Can this casewriter from the little school in the East (or West) find a way to tease out learning from a case and share the methodology through the IM? Or will the Casewriter founder and fall into the abyss of Crystal Ball Questions and Assumptions of Knowledge?

This year, I have read more cases than I could have imagined I would ever do, and these two problems cropped up more than any other (except the difficulty that people have exhibited in writing in the past tense). These problems appear because of our intense desire to exploit "the teachable moment" and use what we DO know to infer that which we can only guess at.

- **Crystal Ball Questions**

  Crystal Ball Questions is my name for all those questions that have no answers. At least, not answers grounded in facts from a case. Some examples:

  - What will the CEO do?
  - How much profit will result from the introduction of a new product?
  - How popular will the new ISP be?
  - Why did the manager behave as she did?

  These are interesting questions. Unfortunately, we would have to be mind readers to answer some of them and seers to answer the others. There are no facts, either in a case itself or available on the Internet, that will tell us the future. There is no way we can be inside the head of any of the characters in our cases to explain their motivations or actions. I know this and you know this. So why do we succumb to the temptation to ask questions like these? The "why" of this rhetorical question is far less important than developing a method for avoiding our tendency to slip into fortune telling. Here is what I suggest. Sometimes, I even remember to do this myself.

  Make a list of the questions you want to ask about your case. Do not answer them yet. Take the list to school and ask one of your colleagues what information is needed to answer the questions. (If you can get your students to do this, so much the better). Then, take that list of elements back to your case and make sure that they appear in the case somewhere. If they do not, and you cannot fit them in comfortably, change the question. You can rewrite these same questions as I have done below to make them answerable by the mortals who use our cases:

  - If you were the CEO, what would you do? Why?
  - What is the potential profit that could result from the introduction of the new product? How would you calculate this forecast?
  - How can you measure the potential popularity of the new ISP? What data would you look for? Where can you find it?
  - What are some potential reasons that the manager behaved as she did? Support your answers with theory.

Suddenly, the student answers become richer, the learning becomes clearer and easier to identify, and the transferability of the response is improved greatly.

- **Assumptions of Knowledge**

  We tend to believe that everyone else knows what we know. After all, it's obvious to us! It's easy to forget how many facts we have accumulated in the dusty file cabinets of our minds, how many impressions we have stored in mental zip-loc bags, and how much inadvertent analysis we have done in the process of writing cases.

  Some of our analysis may slip into the case, only to succumb to editorial "blue penciling" later. More often, we simply overlook certain facts that have become obvious to us, and we exclude them from the case narrative. These facts are not obvious to the reader, however, and our omitting them results in a case that requires the reader to make many inferences, justifiable or not. It becomes difficult to analyze a case properly if important facts are missing or if observed behaviors are not reflected in the case descriptions. For example, why do you know that the CEO behaves in a certain way but claims to support a corporate mission/philosophy that lends itself to a different type of behavior? You only know this because the casewriter took the time to record the action thoroughly. This bit of knowledge has an impact on the way you read the rest of the case and, subsequently, perform the analysis.

  I am particularly prone to making leaps of faith and assuming that everyone else is following me. Unfortunately, when I turn to glance behind me, all I see are people scratching their heads and looking quizzically at the results of my mental gymnastics. The easiest way to avoid leaving salient facts out of your cases, is to have a colleague read the case and answer your discussion questions. If your colleague cannot answer the questions because of missing facts, that's a clear sign that you have some work to do.

  Does it sound to you like you are leaning very heavily on your colleagues? That you are depending on them to keep the quality of your case work high? Of course you are, and that's as it should be. Casewriting is not a solitary and lonely process; it is a social one, and one well accomplished in the company of others. And, in the process, we keep one another "honest!"

The cases in this issue of *The CASE Journal* are a diverse group; you will certainly find something to use in your own teaching here. I'm very pleased to announce the publication of our first Critical Incident, *Competing for New York's Best Lobster Roll: Failed Trade Protection* (David E. Desplaces, Roxane M. DeLaurell, Laquita C. Blockson). If you are teaching small business management/entrepreneurship, you may find this short case very helpful in illustrating the concept of intellectual property and its protection.

The next two cases focus on dysfunctional behavior in organizations. The team of Allison Kipple, Joe S. Anderson, Jack Dustman, and Susan K. Williams leads us through the difficult process of organizational culture change in a highly regulated work environment in *Re-Branding the Leper Colony: Challenges of Changing Culture and Managing Difficult People*. They are followed by another team: Andra Gumbus, Christopher C. York, and Carolyn A. Shea offer *Judy's Defense: One Workplace Bully Is One Too Many,* which deals with the much-publicized current issue of bullying in organizations. Both these cases have a sub-text of gender bias along with their primary content trajectories. Are your students denying the existence of gender bias because of their current enlightened status as college students? These two cases will help them to think again about workplace behaviors.

The two cases that follow take a macro economic perspective. Beginning with *Privatization in the Last Frontier*, LeAnn Beaty examines the process of contracting out correctional facilities in Alaska and challenges students to analyze competing objectives and values. Miriam F. Weismann looks at socially responsible business and supply chain in her case, *Philosopher's Wool Co.: SME Sustainable Supply Chain Management in the Global Economy.* Is social entrepreneurship in conflict with business success? Difficult issues in challenging economic times can make socially responsible decision-making even more challenging.

Gina Vega
Editor