

How to use case studies for learning that leads to action

While commonly, case studies are thought of as little more than interesting reading, they can in fact be an important tool in helping you to learn from the experiences of others. In some cases simply reading them may provide a creative spark in helping you to tackle an issue you have been struggling with. But when case studies are used to best effect, they form the basis for reflection, discussion and action planning. Unlike straightforward guidance or rules, case studies put the power of learning in the hands of those who are reading and using them. They present an opportunity to find out about others' experiences, make comparisons with your own situation and think about how the actions of others might influence your own actions.

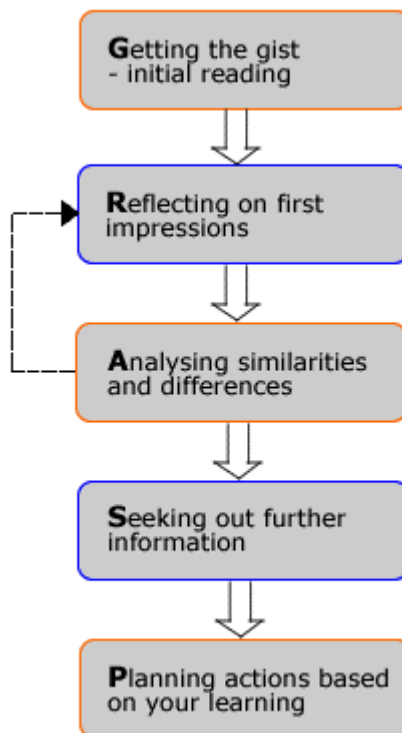
To help you get the most out of our (and any other) case studies, the PMMI team has compiled some suggestions as to how you might use them constructively in identifying, and seeking solutions to, performance management (PM) issues in your own authority or department.¹

The two approaches outlined below address how you might use case studies on your own, and how they might be used with others. Broadly, they are:

- Reading case studies in a close and careful fashion, reflecting on them, analysing them for what is useful, and identifying how what you learn from them could be used in your own authority or department.
- Using them as tools in your organisation to help others understand more about what PM is, why it is important, how to do it and what it can achieve for local people.

Getting a GRASP of case study material

To support reflection, understanding and learning that's more likely to prompt action, the PMMI team has devised the GRASP approach to case study material:



The stages of the GRASP approach are set out below in more detail.

¹ In the remainder of this document, readers should consider the guidance in relation to their own authority, department, team or other work unit as appropriate.

Getting the gist – initial reading of the case study

Read the case study through a couple of times. Use the first read through to get a general sense of what the case study is about. For the PMMI case studies we have provided some summary information to help with this:

- Which issues, stages of the improvement journey or types of authority the case study illustrates
- What makes PM effective in this authority
- How these aspects of effective PM have come about and been demonstrated in practice
- Things for you to think about in your own authority/department

Use the second read through to begin to formulate some first impressions about the story of improvement and its relevance to your own authority's situation.

Reflecting on first impressions

First impressions are important! Having read the case study through a couple of times, spend a few minutes thinking about your immediate response to the material it contains. It would be useful to capture these thoughts in writing.

What are your first impressions?

- Are there any aspects of the case study that immediately strike a chord with the experience of your own authority or an issue that you are currently facing? What are these?
- Are there any aspects of the case study that instantly make you think it has no relevance to you? What are these?
- What was interesting or surprising about the case study?

Later in this activity we suggest you come back and reflect on these first impressions. If your first impressions change a lot you will want to spend some time thinking about why this is, to help you when formulating first impressions on other case studies.

- Did your first impressions tend to be about the differences or the similarities?
- What sections of the case were most significant in helping to formulate your first impressions?
- Was there something about the way in which you approached the case study?

You won't need to note down the answers to these questions but it will be helpful to remember them the next time you read a case study.

Analysing similarities and differences

Having captured your first impressions to the case study read it again, but this time in more detail. It might be helpful to print a copy off so that you can make notes on the page against particular sections. Your note-taking might take the form of:

- Noting down *the ways* in which the case study authority and the issues it has been addressing are similar to your own authority.
- Noting down *the ways* in which it is different.
- Summarising sections of the material in a few words that capture the essence of what each is about.
- Writing down questions that the material generates in your mind. These will probably be where you need more detail . . . or where you are beginning to relate the material in the case study to issues you have been trying to tackle in your own authority.
- Noting down ways in which your own authority has addressed the same or similar issues.

In particular you should re-read the case study paying particular attention to the first impressions you noted down earlier.

- Do your first impressions still hold true?
- Are there ways in which a closer reading has changed your first impressions or revealed new differences or similarities?
- Make additional notes against your first impressions to record the ways in which these have changed (if at all).

More often than not it is much easier to see the differences in something before seeing the similarities! Commonly, case studies are read – and then 'accepted' or 'rejected' – on the basis of how similar or how different the case is to one's own situation. If a case study seems very different it is easy to imagine that it has nothing to offer. This might also be the case if a case study seems very similar! In either case, it is worth considering the nature and importance of the differences and similarities. Take some time to think about the areas you have identified as different or similar from your readings and note taking so far.

In terms of what is different:

- Why is it different?
- How *big* are the differences?
- How *significant* are the differences?

In terms of what is similar?

- Why is it similar?
- How *big* are the similarities?
- How *significant* are the similarities?

It might well be that a big difference (or similarity) is not significant in relation to how useful the case study is in helping you to think about the issues you are tackling in your own authority.

If there are any sections of the case study that particularly make you think, “that’s interesting, but . . .” take a little extra time to think about why this is.

Seeking out further information

Your reading and analysis so far will undoubtedly have raised some questions. These may either be questions related to the case study – where you feel more information would be useful – or questions that relate to your own organisation (and the way that performance management is currently undertaken). Write down the questions that you need answers to . . . and then set about finding the answers.

Planning actions based on your learning

The hardest and most important part of the process of reading and using case studies is actually thinking about what difference the experience of the case study authority might make to the way in which you are tackling issues in your own authority. This is, of necessity, a creative process, and so may be something that is best done as part of a discussion with two or more people.

Revisit the notes you have made so far – and any additional information you have gathered from your subsequent investigations. From what you now understand about the story of improving performance management described in the case study and the way things work in your own authority:

- Identify which issue(s) in your own authority the case study may be relevant to. (These may not be the issues you first had in mind when you started to read the case study!)
- Think about (or discuss) the approach the case study authority took to achieve improvement and the factors that enabled this to be successful.
- Decide whether that approach, or some aspect of it, is appropriate to achieving the objectives you have in mind for improvement in your own authority.
- It is unlikely that the approach in another authority is going to provide a perfect fit to your own. Think about (or discuss) what you might need to do differently to make such an approach successful in your own authority.
- Keeping the case study in mind, write down a tentative plan that begins to describe the objectives you are trying to achieve in your authority and the actions that would be needed to achieve them.

At this point the way you proceed will be largely determined by what your role is in your authority, what actions you think are needed to tackle an issue and bring about improvement, and who else you need to involve/consult in order to turn your tentative plan into action. While we cannot predict every scenario, or prescribe an approach that may be unsuited to the way things are done in your authority, the following prompts might help you make those first steps from thinking to doing.

- Who else do you need to involve/consult about the actions needed to improve? (This may be service users, your staff, your line manager, another service head, someone from the corporate performance management team, your Director, the Chief Executive, Members)
 - What is the best way to involve them? (This may be an informal discussion, an item on a meeting agenda, or something to raise at a team meeting)
 - What information will they need? (This may mean sharing the original case study, writing a paper setting out your thoughts, pulling together other evidence to support your thinking and proposals, making a persuasive case about why the actions are needed and what will improve as a result)
 - What decisions need to be made and by whom? (Be clear about what you expect from your discussions/consultations with others and identify those with ultimate responsibility for making decisions on the proposals)
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Using case studies to work with others

If part of your work is helping others to understand and use performance management – perhaps as a line manager of staff or as an officer in the corporate performance unit – case studies can help you to tell the story of how effective performance management helps deliver service improvement. The GRASP approach can be used in a slightly different way when working with others.

Whether you are sharing case studies with colleagues, using case studies to support points you wish to discuss, or if they are the material used in a workshop, the GRASP technique will help you to get full impact from case studies.

Know your audience

If you are working with Members, or perhaps a particular service, it's worth selecting case study materials that feature people or organisations with similar roles or functions. They don't need to be exactly the same, but you should be able to relate to your audience why their experiences are similar. If you're giving an oral presentation, it's worth emphasising these similarities, in subtle ways, as people are often likely to 'reject' a case study example if they can't visualise themselves in the context it describes. It will be important to think about and discuss not just the approach or the process used by the case study authority, but also the outcomes that were achieved for service users and the community.

Getting (across) the gist

When you've selected a case study to use with an audience or to share with others, ask yourself what you want to achieve. What kind of points are you trying to get across using a case study? Tell the case study story broadly, so that your audience gets a good idea of the context. Use case studies to illustrate three or fewer points you want to get across – any more and it becomes difficult to remember. These points may be the ones that struck you most vividly when first reading through the material. Emphasise the points you want to make and find examples of how actions the case study authority took directly benefited the public. Or how they made officers' or Members' lives easier, freeing up time to concentrate on priority areas.

Reflecting on first impressions

When reading through case studies, identify what really stands out for you, and write these points down. These are likely to be the issues that will really hit home with your audience.

Read the case study again, paying particular attention to the detail of the issues that first interested you.

- What is it about them that's interesting?
- What differences or improvements were achieved?
- How are they relevant to your situation?
- How close are good practice points to what you want to achieve?
- What are the two or three key points from the case study that you want your audience to take away with them?

Help your audience think through the same questions when you've told the story. Check for understanding and ensure that they've picked up the key points you really wanted to get across. Don't be discouraged if some of your audience has a different first impression than you did or other members of the group. People have different learning styles and their own background and experience will mean some things will strike them differently from you. Use this as an opportunity to reflect on more than one aspect of the case study.

Analyse (and communicate) similarities and differences: countering the "we're different" attitude

Case studies can sometimes be a bit challenging. Providing a good example of how someone else has achieved improvements in their own situation can occasionally seem like a veiled threat or an insinuation that they haven't done enough or weren't clever enough to think of the idea themselves. Avoid drawing direct comparisons between your authority and the case study authority. Be sure to share whatever information there is about the difficulties the case study authority had to overcome too. Communicating the difficulties and complexities as well as a story of success makes the case study seem more realistic and less directly challenging. Use reflective questions to help your audience draw the comparisons and identify the lessons themselves. Some useful questions might be:

- What do you think was the most difficult obstacle for them to overcome?
- What was their most important achievement?

These questions don't draw direct comparisons, but help your audience to think about the circumstances and achievements of the case study authority, and the way in which these impacted on the lives of local

people. Your audience will, almost naturally, begin to think about and draw comparisons with their own situation. Only in follow-up questions, can you ask about how this is relevant to your audience's own situation.

Seeking additional information

The additional information here may not be about the case study authority, but about the people you are working with. Using case studies as an analogy for their situation may be able to help you probe and find out more about what some of the key challenge for a particular service or group of Members' may be.

Your audience may also wish to find out more about the case study authority. Beforehand read through the case study with an eye to anticipating what questions your audience may have. It may be worth doing a little additional work in advance to ensure you have the right answers to the most likely questions. It's impossible to identify every question, so talk through what additional information they would like to have about the case study authority. Sometimes, seeking additional information can be a means to stall before going on to the next step, so help your audience identify what information is really necessary for planning improvements in your own authority.

Planning actions based on your learning

Using case studies in a workshop can be an ideal way to prompt people into planning further action. Reflective and probing questioning will help your audience identify what changes they would like to make and what the impact of those changes would be. As for any action plan, it's essential to identify inputs and outputs, risks and resources as well as your desired outcome – improved services for local people. Case studies and follow-up information can help you to be realistic about planning for improvement, taking into account time-scales for achievement and the required resources.