

Nobody's Core Business

Confronting Cross-Cutting Problems in the Public Sector

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, "Nobody's Core Business: Confronting Cross-Cutting Problems in the Public Sector."

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 worksheets to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheets, 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

A city librarian grappled with the question of what to do about opioid use and overdoses in her library. Changes over the past two decades had dramatically expanded the mission of the public library. What began as a repository of human knowledge, offering lending services and study space, had become a community and cultural center with programming and services for people of all ages, from all walks of life. As the library's mission expanded, its partnerships with other municipal organizations, local businesses, and nonprofits multiplied. The librarian, who once advocated for expanding the mission to accommodate young people in need a safe indoor place to be after school, now has a new set of library users with needs that seem far outside her mandate. *Should she have further expanded her mission to include providing lifesaving or other services for opioid users? If not, how should she have handled these new “customers”?*

This case explores tensions between working to achieve a prescribed mission and adapting missions and organizational capacities to changing social, political, and practical realities.

Conversation Plan

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

Ask if a participant will volunteer to summarize facts of the case and the question facing the reader, without stating their opinions. The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *Would you have stocked and administered Narcan at the library?*
(Optional) Do a straw poll.
- *Would you have offered drug abuse prevention programming at the library?*
- *Why would you have taken one or both of these approaches?*
 - Sample answers
 - Saves lives
 - People with substance abuse disorders are already present
 - Opportunity to engage addicted individuals and direct them to services
 - Part of a first aid kit, like defibrillators
 - Relatively inexpensive
 - Part of a community-wide response to an epidemic of opioid abuse
 - Etc.
- *Why not?*
 - Sample answers

- Outside of mission
- Lack of expertise
- Condone drug use in library
- Financial costs
- Needs authorization
- Liability
- Etc.
- *How would you describe the mission of the library?*
(Optional) Write answers on flip chart or whiteboard.
- *How do you think the mission of the library has changed over the years, if at all?*

Introduce the general questions this case raises:

- *If the opioid epidemic was not the library's problem, whose problem was it? How do you know when or whether to embrace a public problem that is outside your organization's mission?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group to apply the concepts discussed to their own managerial challenges.

- *Have you had a public problem that is outside your organization's mission affect your organization? If so, how did your organization respond?*
- *What challenges did you face in responding to the problem?*
- *How did you secure support for changes made in response to the problem?*

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

- Missions can act both as a guide and a constraint when opportunities to make a difference present themselves.
- Problems that show up uninvited and seem outside of a public manager's mandate may be opportunities to make their organization more vital and valuable to the community.
- As organizations adapt and evolve in response to new challenges and opportunities, they must consider the values at stake, the need for new capabilities, and the challenge of securing the necessary support to implement changes.

