

Mayor Curtatone's Culture of Curiosity

Building Data Capabilities at Somerville City Hall

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, "Mayor Curtatone's Culture of Curiosity: Building Data Capabilities at Somerville City Hall."

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 have the option to fill out the attached worksheet 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

For sixteen years, longer than any mayor in the city’s history, Mayor Joseph Curtatone has led his hometown of Somerville, Massachusetts. The case begins in January 2020 when the mayor was looking ahead at his recently-won, two-year term—and to the city’s future without him at the helm. Although he would never feel his work was done, he wondered whether it was time to pass the baton, and if not now, when?

Curtatone, with his intense curiosity for how things work and how they can be improved, brought data and evidence-based decision making to Somerville—a city with a checkered past of corruption and controversy—when he was inaugurated in 2004. He and his team quickly stood up a performance-management system called SomerStat—a constituent services 311 call line under the tagline “one call to city hall”; revamped the city’s budget to be more transparent and tied to strategic goals; and championed an evidence-based, systems-thinking approach to reducing obesity among the city’s schoolchildren and other residents. By 2006, Somerville was hailed a “Model City” by the *Boston Globe*.

The case details how Mayor Curtatone’s culture of curiosity permeated the organization and led to numerous positive outcomes and innovations. While one former chief of staff said that the city “runs on Joe Power,” Curtatone felt that he empowered others to own their ideas. Still, as the case points out, Curtatone knew that “bad leadership can bring down any organization in a city real fast. And it takes years to recover.” He wondered when would be the right time to go and what would remain of the data-informed, decision-making capabilities that he had helped build? What could he do to ensure that even after he was out of office, his nearly two-decade investment would continue to pay dividends to the people of Somerville?

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:

- *How difficult was it to transform Somerville City Hall into a learning organization? What were some early barriers Curtatone had to overcome?*
- *How did becoming a data-informed city make it better, and what are some examples of improvements?*
- *What resources did the city need and what conditions were necessary to build a data-informed city government?*

- *What made up the culture at Somerville's city hall?*

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. Suggested questions:

- *Where could improved data capabilities be useful in your organization, and how would it work?*
- *What culture and resources would it take to do this work well?*

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

- Using data intentionally and systematically can help public leaders better understand problems and needs and better monitor and evaluate the city's response.
- Formulating a vision, setting an example, enforcing norms, and upholding values are imperative to unleash the capabilities of data analytics in cities.
- Part of a leader's role is to diagnose resistance to change and identify levers to change practices and overcome obstacles to using data.
- Being able to learn, improve, and innovate continuously as an organization is no easy feat: the work of spotting new trends, practices, and technologies, as well as being imaginative in how to use them for the benefit of cities, is never finished.
- City leaders who really achieve greatness don't just leave a city better than they found it; they develop the people around them to carry on the work to lead and thrive after they have gone.

Worksheet

1. *What did Mayor Curtatone do to make city hall more data-informed?*
2. *When Mayor Curtatone leaves office, what do you predict will remain of the data capabilities he built over the past eighteen years? What will fall away if a new mayor does not pay sufficient attention to it?*
3. *If you were Mayor Curtatone, what would you do to set the city up for success after you had gone?*
4. *If you were the incoming mayor after Mayor Curtatone, what would you keep, stop, and start doing?*