

Shanties in the Skyline

Addressing Unauthorized Building Works in Hong Kong

Practitioner Guide

JORRIT DE JONG AND GAYLEN MOORE

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, “Shanties in the Skyline: Addressing Unauthorized Building Works in Hong Kong.”

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 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

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, high atop a great many of the older, concrete-block buildings in lower-income areas of central Hong Kong and the neighborhoods of the Kowloon peninsula, informal metal-framed wooden structures housed thousands of families in austere, inexpensive quarters. These rooftop dwellings created a sort of shantytown in the air and, though built illegally, were nonetheless bought, sold, and rented on the open market. These structures were just one example of the larger phenomenon of so-called unauthorized building works (UBWs) in Hong Kong. These included balconies added to windows—sometimes used for beds—as well as hundreds of thousands of storefront street signs and canopy extensions on buildings in commercial districts, used to create rental space below for stores and restaurants on the ground floor. By 1999, the total number of UBWs was estimated at 800,000. By one assessment, if authorities continued enforcing the laws in the manner they had been, it would take more than 130 years to remove all such structures—assuming that new ones were not built in their place.

This case raises questions about how to respond effectively to a complex problem that has arisen as a *solution* to other problems.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (20–30 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 would you describe the problem Leung was trying to solve? (Note responses on a board.)*
- *What were the causes and consequences of the problem? How did they affect your understanding of the problem?*
- *What kinds of solutions/innovations/remedies were most helpful?*

Part 2a: Diagnosing Challenges (20–30 minutes)

This part of the discussion supports a deeper analysis of the challenges around problem-definition and performance-management faced by Leung and the task force.

- *What did the proposed solutions tell us about the nature of the problem?*

(Optional) Go back to the responses to question 1 in the exploration section. Have participants use stickers to vote for the most accurate definition(s) of the problem.

- *Considering these key facets of the problem, which solutions would have worked? How can you tell?*
- *How would Leung and the task force have known if their chosen interventions successfully addressed the problem?*

Part 2b: Application (20 minutes)

If time allows, participants may break into groups to apply the concepts discussed to their own challenges in problem-definition and performance-management.

- *Think of a problem you face that you wish you understood better. What needs to change about how this problem has been defined and understood?*
- *How would a redefinition of the problem or a more nuanced understanding of it change how you are addressing it?*

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. Some sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion:

- It is important to define problems clearly before leaping to potential solutions.
- Choosing an entry point for addressing a problem is rarely objectively clear. Value judgments, perceptions, and interests are always involved.
- When contemplating innovations to address real problems, ask yourself how exactly these proposed changes will help accomplish the work more effectively, efficiently, and equitably.
- Problem-solving is an iterative process.

Appendix

Optional Worksheet Pre-discussion Questions:

1. *How would you describe the problem Leung faced?*
 - a. *Who else faced this problem?*
 - b. *What were the causes and consequences of the problem?*
2. *What (if anything) worked about the Buildings Department's approach to the problem? What was wrong with it?*
3. *What should the task force have recommended as a new or augmented approach?*