

# Mentorship Methods for Successful Case Competition Teams

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**ABSTRACT:** Students at all academic levels have a rare opportunity to integrate and synthesize what they learn in the classroom into an applied real-world environment by using the case construct in case competitions. Since the majority of these competitions are ungraded, feedback from mentors, instructors, and students on both sides of the figurative desk can be extremely candid without causing awkward situations, making it more constructive, changing the atmosphere in a traditional classroom or the students' grade point average, or having an effect on teaching evaluations. The end product is frequently a rigorously analytical paper or PowerPoint presentation where students can deftly illustrate their understanding of the material, persuasively argue their recommendations, participate in insightful Q&A sessions, and adhere to best practices for teamwork. The purpose of this research is to investigate how undergraduate and graduate academic programs advise and coach case competition teams. The two most important variables that determine a case competition rank are "Effort Invested as a Team" and "Mentor Hours."

**KEYWORDS:** case competitions, mentorship methods, teamwork, coaching strategies

## Background

When action learning first began 25 years ago, students used it to spark conversation and looked to their peers for input (Wade and Hammick 1999, 163). A few years later, action learning sponsors and consultants (Bong, Cho and Kim 2014, 278) were added, and real-world concerns were integrated (Clarke, Thorpe, Anderson and Gold 2006, 441). Action learning is credited to Reginald Revans, who is regarded as its founder. Pedler (2016, 1) claims that the process method promotes incremental improvements in all aspects of life, including oneself, rather than organizational change. David Kolb created that learning style in 1984 in contrast to experiential learning, and according to Mcleod (2023), it is a split theory with four cycles and four distinct learning styles. Action learning components, such as initiatives with outside entrepreneurs or companies, are a feature of most academic classes. A case competition is one instance; it's a team-based activity that may entail making a timed pitch, evaluating a business, or distributing funds (Carter, Burke and Hughey 2019, 475).

Case competitions offer a special chance for students of all academic levels to apply what they learn in the classroom using the case study method (Nohria 2021), enhance research literacy (Donnelly and Sherlock 2023, 16), engage in constructive peer interaction (Strayhorn, 2008, 1), and do so in a practical and multidisciplinary way (Bennis and O'Toole 2005, 96). The majority of these ungraded competitions address actual issues (Boshyk 2019), advance students' careers (Lynch et al. 2022, 298), and facilitate extremely open communication between mentors, students, and faculty members on both sides of the figurative desk. This will allow for more positive interactions without changing the atmosphere of a regular classroom, having an impact on a student's GPA, enhancing the wellbeing of students (Carrell and Kurlaender 2023, 113), or influencing faculty teaching ratings (Marcel and Ross Mahon 2019, 101). The end product is frequently a rigorously analytical paper or PowerPoint presentation (Gibson, Kincade and Frasier 2013, 64) in which students may skillfully illustrate their understanding of the material, persuasively argue their recommendations, participate in insightful Q&A, and adhere to collaborative best practices.

Team building is a critical component of competition success (Brutus and Bothello 2021, 596), and Rhee thinks collaboration is the source of invention (2013, 1). A lot of literature has

been produced regarding SAFe Agile's software development teamwork methodology, which emphasizes communication and trust-building through scrum-focused processes (Strode, Dingsøyr, and Lindsjorn 2022, 56). Their study raises several interesting questions, one of which is how much of a team should be preselected with experts from other fields, even when the members may not have previously collaborated on a class assignment or even met. This approach is comparable to the one used by the gymnastics coaches to put together a squad, which combines generalists and event experts (Roenigk 2023). Conversely, when kids feel at ease working with "friends," they are frequently happy. In a 2017 (p. 115) publication, Freeman, Theobald, Crowe and Wenderoth addressed this, pointing out that most people self-select based on their gender and background. They also noted that, according to research from the University of Washington, happier students are more motivated to learn (Dreezens 2020, 45) and produce beneficial outcomes outside of the classroom (Eckart 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

To prepare competing pupils, effective coaching and mentoring are essential, and mentors need to build trust with their teams. According to Carter, Burke and Hughey (2019, 475), case competitions increase student engagement, while Burke, Carter and Hughey (2013, 157) found that cross-functional teams outperform traditional teams due to their increased expertise across disciplines. Judges use tough Q&A led by industry expert judging panels (Burke, Carter and Hughey 2013, 157) and progressively whittle down teams as they advance to the semi-final and final rounds. This occurs during the pitching of these new ideas, company analyses, or funding allocations, and with content synthesized from across disciplines (Byrne 2023).

However, identifying and putting into practice good mentoring is difficult. Although 93% of company executives in 17 different countries think that mentoring would be beneficial, less than one-third actually take advantage of the programs that are offered (Kar and Sarangi 2020, 104). A person's commitment to the organization is undermined by ineffective mentoring (Heath and Williams 2023, 1), and there aren't many industry-standard rubrics available (Boysen et al. 2020). Scope is typically lacking in formal programs (Ocobock et al. 2022, e23690).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to investigate how undergraduate and graduate academic programs advise and coach case competition teams. At this point in the study, coaching and mentoring tactics will be broadly interpreted as aiding with enrolled students as well as former competitors who have graduated within the last five years.

### **Research Question**

In what ways might team formation foster a supportive learning atmosphere where graduate or undergraduate students are willing to accept coaching and feel at ease? Although the relationships are more complicated, the Harvard Business Review claims that diverse teams typically provide superior results. (Rock, Grant and Grey 2016, 22). Furthermore, a number of case competition teams are assembled from students from various majors or from both inside and outside of business schools. Regarding graduate studies, full-time MBA programs, evening MBA programs, and other one-year master's programs focused on specialization are frequently offered (Bristol 2023).

A team's success may also be impacted by its "age" within the program (undergrad vs. graduate) or program type (full-time vs. evening MBA). Of course, diversity encompasses both demographics and ethnicities. According to research done in 2020 by authors Kim and Song,

diverse teams are linked to higher levels of creativity and learning for women and students of color (Graves and Luciano 2013, 518).

### **Mentorship Theory**

Citing Consensus Theory, Weller, Johnson and Dressler (2023) propose that models constructed with cultural consensus resulted in a convergence of validity. Three distinct mentoring models are therefore pertinent to this research. The first is from Asogwa and Mathenjwa (2023), who established eight essential elements of a healthy relationship (e.g., role modeling, open communication, information exchange, etc.) and developed mentorship theory. The authors developed their hypothesis, which focused on establishing congruence between mentors and mentees, by citing the original work of Eller, Lev and Feurer (2014, 815) and Sullivan, Bishop and Pivik (1995, 524). The second model comes from Saripah, Lestari, Putra, and Mutamam (2022, 106), who apply it to business plan contests for social entrepreneurship. They do this by citing studies by Cohen, Fehder, Hochberg and Murray (2019, 1781) regarding enhancing start-up performance and Supriyati, Iqbal, and Khotimah (2016, 203) regarding useful coaching techniques. Lastly, the third model is based on research by Biggs (1996, 180) on the Presage Process and Whitmore (1994) on the GROW model, and it originates from Binti Kamarudin and Binti Darmi (2020, 289) regarding the most effective learning processes between teachers and students. According to their 2020 study, the mentor has a responsibility to set an example for the precise behaviors they desire from their mentee.

### **Methodology**

Five "Informant Interviews" (Spradley 2016) were conducted in the fall of 2023 with students from teams that intentionally performed remarkably well (or poorly) in previous case contests (Stoller 2023). Then, in January 2023, a mini-survey was conducted with IRB approval obtained from Boston University in December 2023 to examine the responses of fifteen students from two additional Boston-area schools. Out of thirty respondents, 24 gave the survey request a good response. Permission to increase the survey size by twofold was received three months later. More than 52 out of 100 respondents have replied favorably thus far.

To finish the study, two data analysis programs were used: SPSS and Jamovi. Two approaches to using SPSS were taken: using Pearson correlations under Bayesian Statistics as a full survey (i.e., all genders combined) and then running the survey separately by gender. For Jamovi, the program offers superior graphical reporting in a Generalized Linear Mediation Model for direct, indirect, and component correlations even though the identical core data set was utilized. According to Jebb (2017, 265), the majority of statistical models employ factor analysis and regression, while Jamison (2023, 13235) tested the link between themes and variables using a multiple linear regression approach akin to this. In the first edition of their book on generalized linear models, Dobson and Barnett (2018) expressed their intention to provide a theoretical, conceptual, and cohesive framework. They have now presented Bayesian analysis of nonlinear relationships in its fourth edition (Dobson and Barnett 2018), a large portion of which is used here.

A study survey with 57 questions was created in October 2023. Simultaneously, a research template was developed in December 2023 using test answer data obtained from Qualtrics in order to start investigating correlations between variables. Both inside and outside of scientific research, the use of sample data and the establishment of reference intervals are crucial (Katayev, Balciza and Seccombe 2010, 180).

Eight of the 116 survey variables were chosen initially to get descriptive statistics. Prior to performing correlation analysis, it was crucial to confirm that the measurement was accurate. Descriptive statistics are the next phase in the process, following the graphic depiction of the data (Johnson 2014, 288). Subsequently, variable associations and 95% confidence intervals

were examined using Bayes Factor Inference on Pairwise Correlations and Posterior Distribution Characterization for Pairwise Correlations. Dienes (2014, 85883) suggests applying Bayes to ascertain whether the presence or absence of significance contradicts a hypothesis, in line with Dobson and Barnett (2018). Faraway (2016, 1) conducted a reanalysis of the data, dividing it based on gender this time.

Among the various factors, it stands to reason that a team's rank should be positively impacted by how much time it spends with its mentor and how much effort it puts into the tournament (Chun and Larrick 2022, 983). Using work by Jamison (2023, 13235), the Generalized Linear Mediation Model (GLMM) was now used to plot the direct, indirect, and component effects. However, using the Case Competition Rank as the dependent variable, more than ten different permutations were performed with various Mediators and Covariates. These included, but were not limited to, Gender, Age, Academic Program type, Graduation Date, Years of Work Experience, Grade Point Average, Percentage of Women vs. Men, Team Composition (i.e., self-selected vs. assigned), Effort Invested as a Team, Desire to Win, Mentor Hours, and the number of Mentors used.

The team's collective mentor hours and effort ultimately had the biggest impact on Rank. The R, R-squared, and coefficient of these variables were then analyzed using Hayes' PROCESS technique in SPSS (Igartua and Hayes 2021, 24). In October 2023, Dr. Hayes was approached to address discrepancies between Jamovi's GLMM and his model (Stoller 2023).

## Discussion

Mentor Hours and Team Effort were the two main elements influencing the Case Competition. With a p-value of .0000, the r-squared value is 59.34%. Mentor Hours yielded an efficient value of .9490, while Team Effort yielded a value of 1.4675. The direct effect of Team Effort Invested versus Competition Rank showed a p-value of less than .0001 according to the GLM Mediation Model. The p-value for Mentor Hours against Competition Rank (component #2) was less than .001, while the p-value for Effort Invested as a Team against Mentor Hours (component #1) was 0.890. The p-value for the indirect relationship between Effort Invested as a Team and Mentor Hours and Rank in Competition was 0.890. The highest Pearson correlations were .638 (Rank vs. Team Effort) and .447 (Rank vs. Mentor Hours) according to the Bayes Factor analysis. The values for males (.608 and .552) were greater than those for females (.569 and .289).

The variables that did not significantly alter competition rank are especially noteworthy. Using the Pearson Correlation method, Years of Full-Time Experience and rank had a negative correlation of -.282 and -.010, respectively, for the combined gender sample. The gender in the Bayesian Correlation was favorably corrected (.405). Nevertheless, substantially higher p-values of over .896 were obtained when the Percentage of Women was used as a direct or indirect impact versus Mentor Hours or Rank. This is true even though the value of diversity has been the subject of a great deal of writing. Demographic background, for instance, had no discernible effect.

The data provides quantitative evidence in favor of the hypothesis that a team's performance should be positively impacted by the amount of effort they put in and the time they spend working with a mentor. This aligns with the findings of Cherkowski's research (Cherkowski and Walker 2019, 345). The modest correlations found for the number of hours worked individually, the quantity of full-time work experience, and whether the teams were assigned or self-selected were equally unexpected. The Pearson correlation between Team Selection and Rank was found to be low, at .291, even though there has been literature on the benefits of student interaction and professor-formed teams. Students from all three universities had the same outcomes.

Beyond the literature or the quantitative research, the word cloud analysis provided insightful information. The most common responses to survey question #21, which asked about "skill set distribution," were related to industry analysis, presentation creation, and company research. Because of their very nature, the majority of these involve teams. According to Chou's 2016 article, cooperative learning has a stronger relationship with reciprocal cooperation and more substantial learning outcomes. Despite the high literary premium placed around confidence, all but two respondents ranked teamwork skills as a benefit from participation (survey question #40), ranking slightly higher than analytical skills and self-assurance.

Just two respondents said they had participated in three or four previous case competitions, while 13 of the 21 respondents said this was their first. Regarding whether a team felt it was successful and whether a particular student would be inclined to compete in a case competition again, the means were 90% and 81%, respectively. Once more, every student at all three universities experienced the same outcomes.

A few open-ended, short-answer survey questions were included. The most often given answers concentrated on developing team trust, skill alignments, and timeline alignments; these were viewed as a learning process that required trial and error, as well as experience competing against students from other schools. In a study by Jones, this is totally in line with the literature (Jones and Graham 2015, 49).

### **Study Limitations**

The sample size is the first of several possible areas where this study could be limited. For the past nine years, more than 2,400 undergraduate and graduate students from various schools have competed in these events, making up 150 case competition teams. In addition, 332 students would be the appropriate sample size if 2,400 students were used as the sample size with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence interval, according to Qualtrics and CheckMarket.com (Qualtrics 2023). Going one step further, CheckMarket suggests inviting 1,660 individuals to take part (CheckMarket 2021). 100 participants made up the sample size for this investigation.

The study's second limitation relates to the categories of respondents that made up the 50 observations. Only 100 students who had closely worked on competing teams or under a director's supervision for a multi-school case competition were contacted since IRB approval was obtained to conduct a brief student survey. Team members who had performed well or poorly in their individual competitions were selected from among the 100 pupils. The study encompassed a cross-section of students from various colleges in the Boston region, categorized according to their gender, graduation year, program type (undergraduate vs. graduate), academic discipline (business vs. non-business), and nationality (US vs. non-US). For the following phase, this was extended to teams with no interaction or just collateral contact. All things considered and given that a perfect response rate was not attained, the findings may be only partially definitive. This study is still not completely randomized with a control group, as Camuffo studied a few years earlier, even though many of the 100 students utilized several of the same mentors and participated in the same case competition (i.e., albeit in separate years) (Camuffo, Cordova, Gambardella and Spina 2020, 564).

The survey's substance is the study's third restriction. In the middle of October 2023, the survey's initial draft was created. Academic and professional mentors in my network, senior research colleagues at Boston University, and a faculty member in a PhD program I was taking in the autumn semester all approved it. It underwent multiple revisions before reaching around sixty questions, and it was only administered once in the middle of January 2024. In order to avoid creating a conflict of interest, the time window between classes was purposefully designed to allow students in a graded class to finish an "extra-curricular" type assignment. The comprehensive survey is still being built, despite considerable efforts to integrate qualitative and quantitative questions.

## Next Steps

The input received from this research suggests that further qualitative and quantitative evaluations should be conducted in order to identify the most effective mentoring and coaching techniques for case competition teams. Direct feedback on this article, continuous criticism during the writing of a dissertation, and suggestions from senior advisers and peers if the work is ever presented at a conference will all be used to finish this. Four areas will be the focus of subsequent research: 1) The most effective ways to recruit pro bono mentors (Walshe et al. 2021, 710) and maintain diversity (Sober 2020, 31), 2) Why and how mentors perceive the best strategies for success (Schwan et al. 2020, 190), 3) The ways in which students can and should integrate input (O'Donovan et al. 2021, 318; Grundmann, Scheibe and Epstude 2021,3); and 4) The lessons that entrepreneurs can take away from case competitions to better establish their businesses (Kulturel-Konak 2021).

## Conclusion

Success in case competitions is not just about the singular event but also contributes to student achievement and higher self-confidence, the positive relevancy of their studies (i.e., 'excitement' about school), future success, and learning engagement. Additionally, these contests effectively combine the application of academic skills and knowledge in a business context. For students who desire to differentiate themselves from classmates, participating in case competitions is a great way to optimize their academic experience. They can also uniquely demonstrate to prospective employers what value they might bring to their firms (Plakhotnik, Krylova and Maslikova 2020, 659). Winning teams earn their honors from teamwork, practice, and resilience.

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