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The Lyceum Case Method

A Classical Approach to Judgment-Based Board Education

Most board education today rests on a reasonable premise: if directors understand their duties, standards, and best practices, they will govern well. This premise explains the dominance of checklists, frameworks, and “top ten” lists in modern governance instruction.

Quintilian, writing on the education of those who would one day give counsel in public affairs, drew a line that modern leadership education often ignores. There are dimensions of judgment, he argued, that cannot be transmitted through rules or precepts – no matter how well constructed or authoritatively delivered. As he put it, “*they will be taught by practice what they cannot perhaps receive on the credit of precepts.*”

Lyceum’s case methodology is built on this distinction. Our cases are not designed to explain governance. They are designed to *exercise judgment* in conditions that resemble the moments when leaders and directors are actually called upon to give counsel – and to articulate that counsel responsibly and persuasively, in public.

Boards rarely fail because directors are unaware of their responsibilities. They fail because judgment falters under pressure – social pressure, authority pressure, time pressure, reputational pressure, and cognitive pressure. No checklist prepares a director for the moment when everyone around the table appears confident, aligned, and ready to move forward, even though something feels wrong.

Lyceum’s cases are designed for those moments. But not all moments are the same. Accordingly, not all cases should be written the same way.

A Classical Pedagogical Lineage

Lyceum’s approach draws from a much older educational tradition. In *Institutio Oratoria* (year), the Roman teacher Quintilian argued that general rules and precepts are always inferior to examined experience. Judgment, he held, is not formed by memorization, but by studying how real actors reasoned – wisely or foolishly – under real conditions.

Quintilian also insisted on something more demanding: students must study not only exemplary decisions, but admired failures – moments when confidence, eloquence, consensus, or procedure masked error. Only by seeing how persuasive reasoning can go wrong does judgment mature.

Lyceum’s case methodology stands squarely in this tradition. Classical education never relied on a single kind of case, nor did it treat judgment as something formed silently or in isolation. Alongside the study of historical examples, students were required to speak: to give advice, to warn, to dissent, and to persuade under conditions of uncertainty, without the benefit of hindsight.

This discipline – known in antiquity as *declamation* – treated judgment not merely as an internal faculty, but as a public act subject to scrutiny, resistance, and consequence by others whose interests may differ.

Lyceum's cases are therefore designed not only to be read, but to be argued, because fiduciary responsibility is exercised as much through speech as through analysis.

The Lyceum Case Taxonomy

Lyceum cases fall into distinct – but complementary – pedagogical types. Each is written differently because each is designed to form a different faculty of judgment.

1. Deliberative Boardroom Cases

(Judgment under pressure – counsel at the point of decision)

Some Lyceum cases reconstruct decisions as they unfolded, often through fictionalized boardroom minutes, dialogue, and inner monologue.

These cases:

- Suspend outcomes until after immersion
- Place the reader inside a constrained decision moment
- Surface social pressure, authority dynamics, and rhetorical influence

In classical terms, these cases function as *suasoriae*: deliberative exercises in giving counsel at moments when facts are incomplete, outcomes are unknown, and values are in tension. Participants are not asked merely what they think, but what they would advise – and how they would justify that advice to others who may disagree.

Devices such as fictionalized minutes, The Sage and The Fool, and inner monologue are not creative flourishes. They are classical tools designed to train discernment in moments where judgment must be exercised publicly, imperfectly, and in real time.

These cases ask:

Would you have seen the flaw?

Would you have spoken?

Could you have persuaded?

2. Moral-Exemplary Historical Cases

(Moral perception and foresight)

Other Lyceum cases are written as historical narratives rather than deliberative exercises. Outcomes are often known in advance. The instructional aim is not suspense, but moral clarity.

These cases examine:

- Visionaries who were ignored
- Power structures that resisted change
- Tragedies that unfolded over time rather than moments

Their purpose is to sharpen moral perception – to help leaders recognize recurring human and institutional patterns before they reappear in new forms.

These cases also invite a form of disciplined identification. Readers are often asked to consider not only what history revealed, but how it might have sounded in the moment, *before* outcomes were known – what could have been said, by whom, and at what risk. In classical education, this exercise trained moral

perception by requiring students to speak in character, confronting the limits of foresight, influence, and courage.

These cases ask:

What kinds of truth fail to be heard?

What does foresight without influence look like?

What does power do to judgment over time?

3. Analytic–Diagnostic Behavioral Cases

(Cognitive self-recognition)

Some Lyceum cases operate at a different level altogether. They pair historical narrative with explicit analytical overlays – often drawn from behavioral science – to expose how intelligent, well-intentioned actors become blind without realizing it.

These cases focus on:

- Cognitive illusions
- Systemic normalization of error
- Compliance mistaken for assurance
- Distributed responsibility without accountability

They are not written to ask, “*What would you do?*” They are written to ask, “*What are you blind to right now?*” Their pedagogical function is diagnostic, not dramatic. They also test *persuasive error*, i.e. how readily intelligent actors can *defend* their reasoning – sometimes most convincingly when that reasoning is incomplete, motivated, or mistaken.

4. Prospective or Preventive Cases

(Judgment before failure)

These examine:

- Near-misses
- Decisions that *almost* went wrong
- Risks detected early and quietly corrected

Their pedagogical value is distinctive: training directors to recognize danger *before* it becomes dramatic, litigated, or tragic.

Classical educators valued this form highly. It teaches restraint, timing, and early intervention – skills as essential to governance as courage under fire.

Why Lyceum Does Not Use a Single Case Formula

Traditional case studies tend to standardize format. Classical education did not.

Judgment has multiple failure modes:

- It can collapse in the room
- It can be silenced by power
- It can be eroded by time
- It can be distorted by cognition itself

No single case form can train against all of these. Lyceum’s methodology therefore varies the form to match the failure being examined, while remaining unified in purpose.

Why We Often Withhold Easy Answers

Across all case types, Lyceum resists tidy resolutions.

Real governance failures rarely announce themselves as failures. They feel reasonable, justified, and even responsible in the moment. To rush to conclusions is to short-circuit learning. Instead, Lyceum cases invite readers to sit with discomfort:

- When should a director persist, and when does persistence become obstruction?
- How does one distinguish decisiveness from haste?
- When does compliance become complicity?
- What does fiduciary courage require when silence is safer?

In many Lyceum settings, this discomfort is sharpened by requiring participants to give reasons aloud, exposing assumptions that might otherwise remain unexamined. This discomfort is not a flaw in the method. It is central to the method.

Judgment, Not Compliance

Lyceum does not seek to replace governance standards, legal doctrine, or fiduciary rules. Those matter. But they are insufficient on their own.

Our cases aim to develop something harder and more durable: the capacity to see clearly, to question rigorously, and to act wisely when incentives, authority, consensus, or cognition pull in the opposite direction. That capacity cannot be check-listed into existence. It must be formed.

In Closing

Lyceum's cases are written the way they are because governance is lived the way it is – through dialogue, persuasion, misperception, hesitation, conviction, and sometimes silence.

Different failures demand different forms of instruction. What unites Lyceum's approach is not format, but purpose: the disciplined formation of judgment in those entrusted with consequential decisions.

Directors deserve an education that prepares them not only to know their duties, but to *exercise them well* – especially when doing so is hardest. Judgment worthy of trust is not improvised. It is practiced.

