Critical Incidents Featuring Christian Businesses: New Research and Publication Opportunities for CBFA Faculty

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ABSTRACT: Critical incidents featuring Christian businesses represents a very viable research opportunity for CBFA faculty. This research integrates the theoretical with the practical and can result in very relevant teaching instruments with measurable application to learning outcomes and immediate implementation in the classroom. This paper will give the explanation of critical incidents and the steps required to successfully pursue this research opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to identify and elaborate on specific research opportunities for Christian business faculty. This research is practical in orientation, very applicable to the classroom environment, case-based, and interactive as researchers consider businesses practicing or displaying Christian values and principles. The research can blend the theory and practice and can be easily implemented through multiple venues, which makes it user-friendly and functional.

WHAT ARE CRITICAL INCIDENTS?

Critical incidents are essentially simplified case studies. They generally focus around a single scenario or topic area, are relatively limited in scope, have a length of around three pages, have a practical orientation; however, they are theoretically based and replicate a "real-world" situation in an existing organization. In a time when social media informs the population in limited sound bites or characters and students seem to prefer short and condensed assignments and activities, the critical incident can become a perfect assignment for a multitude of educational learning outcomes.

Definition

To differentiate critical incidents from cases, researchers have defined them as being shorter, more focused, and less complex than cases (Cook, Corman, & Clay, 1998). The focus of a critical incident is a single decision by a single decision-maker that has far-reaching implications. The critical incident, while based on a real situation, does not get into a detailed review of the organization's overall situation. The length of the situation description, amount of historical background provided, number of problems raised, and level of complexity are all reduced in critical incidents (Cook et al., 1998).

Often, these incidents are used to illustrate a single best practice or a prominent theory. While such situations serve to demonstrate a concept and are often liked by professors and students because of their brevity and simplicity, users should realize that such incidents are a limited picture of a complex situation and much of the richness may be lost, limiting one's ability to analyze and diagnose a specific similar situation in an actual organization (Thomas, 2006). While somewhat modified in structure and scope, the critical incident still retains much of the richness of a more comprehensive and complex case. A critical incident might be considered analogous to getting 80% of the benefit for 20% of the effort.

History

In 2008, the Society for Case Research published its inaugural edition of the *Journal of Critical Incidents* (*JCI*). Coincidentally, Columbia University and Harvard decided

that the adoption of the newer, shorter case format also fit an academic need. In early February 2008, Business Week carried a story in which Columbia announced its new initiative called CaseWorks (Gloeckler, 2008, p. 66). The story stated that CaseWorks would produce "decision briefs" that offer less information about a company and its context than a classic Harvard case study. The purpose of the decision briefs would be to provoke students to develop a solution to a business problem in spite of limited, incomplete data. Decision briefs are also being used in Columbia's MBA program and are developed by the faculty (Gloeckler, 2008).

How Critical Incidents Differ from Case Studies

Much has been written on how critical incidents differ from case studies. It is important in completing critical incident research and its application in the classroom to understand this distinction. A comprehensive discussion of the characteristics of critical incidents and cases was presented in a concise table format. (Berger, Stratton, Thomas & Cook, 2012). The table is reproduced in Table 1.

HOW CRITICAL INCIDENTS CAN BE USED

Another distinction about critical incidents is their immediate applicability to the classroom. When so much scholarship is so theoretical in nature that its only users are other academics, it is noteworthy to have some scholarship that has an obvious practical application. Original theoretical empirical research is critical, and remains the primary form of scholarship for academia, but there is also a place for practical research like critical incidents. Also, part of the strength of the critical incident is how it can relate to and reinforce theoretical concepts in a practical setting. This association of

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS AND CASES

	Critical Incidents	**Cases**
Form	Brief, very limited historical detail and background information.	Extensive detail and historical information; some or a considerable amount of irrelevant information.
Length	Some have suggested a maximum length of 10 pages. However, it appears that a limit of about three pages is more appropriate.	Generally quite lengthy, with no limits on length.
Assumptions	What is important is clearly defined; little or no irrelevant information or dead ends.	Students use background information and historical detail to determine what is important.
Student Task	Students are prompted to use their knowledge of concepts and principles to solve the problem.	Students will determine, often without questions, what knowledge, concepts and principles to use to solve the problem.
Learning Objectives	Learning objectives targeted to discipline specific analysis and application.	Higher order critical thinking objectives including synthesis, analysis and evaluation.
Learning Processes -- Signature Pedagogies	Requires that the salient knowledge in the discipline be identified. Students are expected to use the accepted means of analyzing, criticizing, accepting and discarding knowledge. It is expected that students will model what experts in the field would do based on what they have "learned."	Student must determine the salient knowledge. Cases are generally complex and subject to analysis by using multiple frameworks. Students are expected to sort through larger quantities of information to determine necessary and appropriate information. Student assignments typically include analyzing relevant information, developing viable alternatives, recommending a course of action, and explaining why the alternative selected was the most appropriate.
Processes - Disciplined Thinking	Requires students to integrate knowledge and concepts engaging in analysis and synthesis. Students must make some assumptions based on their background and knowledge. Resulting analysis is thus to some extent general and somewhat hypothetical.	Students are expected to know how to use knowledge and concepts to generate and evaluate alternative courses of action, and recommend an alternative deemed most appropriate. The wealth of information included in the case leads to an analysis that uniquely treats the specific situation.

the theoretical with the practical will make critical incidents a very valuable teaching tool in a number of formats.

Teaching in the Classroom

The ability to learn about "real-world" situations in a decision-based format is a powerful teaching method in the classroom. Students can identify and relate to companies and incidents highlighted in a critical incident. By putting the student in the place of the protagonist in the critical incident, the student experiences as close to "firsthand" as possible situations and scenarios that actually take place in the professional business environment.

Today's students, both graduate and undergraduate, often have different learning styles. The term "learning style," which began to appear in various pedagogical journals in the 1970s, refers to the inclination of an individual student toward a particular learning approach in a classroom or course setting (Robotham, 2000). As the concept was developed, researchers posited that students would do best if the instructional style of their teachers matched each student's preferred learning style. Matthews (1991) argued that "students have more positive attitudes towards school and achieve more knowledge and skills when taught…through their primary [learning] style, rather than a style that is secondary…" (p. 257). While there has been much discussion as to whether this theory holds true, there is some support for active, hands-on learning and its ability to improve students' motivation and attitudes (Matthews, 1991).

Online

With the dramatic increase of online learning, great care needs to be considered when identifying suitable instruments for measuring performance and acquired knowledge. The typical closed-book, timed examination, which is so easy to implement in a controlled classroom environment, is much more complicated to effectively monitor in an online setting. While there can be some success to offer structured, objective testing, limitations are evident and testing methods are not foolproof.

Critical incidents provide a viable alternative for testing student learning and knowledge in an online environment. They also can promote a higher level of critical thinking. A most effective critical incident or case is one in which there is not one obvious correct answer. As with most any decision-making situation, it is how you develop and interpret the evidence that will weigh most heavily in the final decision. This form of testing and assessment can be equally effective in either a classroom or online learning environment and not subject to the same limitations of a typical closed-book testing situation.

Critical incidents also work well in either an individual or group setting for either a classroom or online assignment. Since critical incidents typically do not have a single, set answer, group settings can be a preferred method of presentation. If individual members of the group interpret the evidence in a different way, there could be a variety of proposed solutions. These multiple opinions will foster group dynamics and generally cause members to delve deeper into the issues of the critical incident as attempts are made to defend or refute opinions and positions.

Role Playing

Critical incidents can be brought to life through a role-playing process. Students can essentially relive the scenarios being presented in the critical incident and better understand the dynamics and human elements involved. Becoming a part of a decision-making situation can enhance learning and make the assignment a fun and diverse activity. The critical incident can be used to reinforce the theoretical concepts presented through reading assignments or lecture presentations. Because of the opportunity for multiple solutions, there is no set way the role-playing may take the critical incident. Such diversity can make for any number of teachable moments and learning opportunities that the students should actually enjoy, especially if there is an epilogue to the critical incident.

Examination

Critical incidents can serve as ideal examination exercises. Since they are limited in length and complexity, the time needed to develop a solution should be reasonable in terms of an exam timeframe. Complex cases could take ten hours or more to develop answers, whereas answers to critical incidents can be completed in a couple of hours or maybe less depending on the number of questions presented. Also, beyond the testing of general knowledge, critical incidents promote the application of theoretical concepts into practical settings. Critical incidents can also test for critical thinking skills and decision-making ability.

An important consideration for any examination activity is the use of Bloom's Taxonomy (http://www.officeport.com/edu/blooms.htm). Bloom found that more than 95% of the test questions that students encounter require them to think at only the lowest possible level, the recall of knowledge. However, critical incidents can be extremely useful in that they can address all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy intellectual behavior and learning as shown by the following definitions of the levels of learning (Bloom 1956):

Knowledge of terminology; specific facts; ways and means of dealing with specifics (conventions, trends and sequences, classifications and categories, criteria, methodology)

Comprehension Grasping (understanding) the meaning of informational materials

Application The use of previously learned information in new and concrete situations to solve problems that have single or best answers

Analysis The breaking down of informational materials into their component parts, examining (and trying to understand the organizational structure of) such information to develop divergent conclusions by identifying motives or causes, making inferences, and/or finding evidence to support generalizations

Synthesis Creatively or divergently applying prior knowledge and skills to produce a new or original whole

Evaluation (On same level as synthesis?): Judging the value of material based on personal values/opinions, resulting in an end product, with a given purpose, without real right or wrong answers

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

The greatest satisfaction from working with critical incidents can be in the development of the practical applications of the specific situation. The opportunity to work with business professionals, especially individuals who are practicing Christian values and principles in their business, can be most rewarding. Each situation is unique, and learning about how Christian business leaders are trying to make a difference in the world is inspiring. The development of critical incidents with businesses can easily become a win-win situation for all parties.

Working with Christian Businesses
Having developed case studies and critical incidents with Christian business leaders in all parts of the country has been most gratifying. Without exception, these individuals want to share their stories, especially with the added Christian dimension. They are also impressed that a large segment of the target audience will be students attending Christian universities.

Far too often, it has been like ships passing in the night. Christian faculty are confined to their university walls, interacting with students and following a prescribed text-

book and lecture presentation format for teaching. At the same time, Christian business leaders are confined to their company walls, interacting with employees, customers, and suppliers and concentrating on products, production, and profitability. The link between Christian business faculty and Christian business leaders is limited and lacking.

The development of a critical incident or case study is an ideal way to bring together these two camps, and the initiative needs to start with the faculty member since scholarship is an academic exercise. Having and practicing Christian values becomes an immediate common denominator that will assist in this research process. When both parties are "singing from the same song sheet" and have a vested interest in each other's success, the opportunities to develop a viable critical incident are greatly enhanced.

The faculty member must convey an element of trust and confidentiality as the business leader can easily feel at risk as a story about the business is told. This level of confidentiality, especially as it applies to financial information and personnel matters, must be maintained. Even in harmonious situations, business leaders are reluctant to share critical financial information regarding pricing, cost factors, profitability, and taxes, and there are potential legal considerations when it comes to personnel issues. Such concern is understandable as the publication of this financial or personnel information could create a competitive disadvantage to the business regarding its relationship with customers, suppliers, other competing businesses, and the government.

There are several ways to protect confidentiality, such as disguising the company name, location, names of individuals, and nature of the business. Also financial data can be modified by a constant factor, or percentages can be used in place of actual dollar amounts. Personnel issues can become an area of concern with inappropriate disclosure. Divulging information that could lead to the identification of specific individuals without their consent could be problematic. The business leader must have full access to the critical incident and give approval before any effort is made to publish the material. For every critical incident, there needs to be a signed release form where the businessman/protagonist agrees to the nature and extend of any disguises or adjustments and to the entire content of the critical incident.

Linking Theory and Practice
One of the greatest values of the critical incident is in its ability to link theory and practice. While concepts and theories are emphasized and explored in the classroom, the use of "real-world" examples is still needed to solidify the learning process. In businesses, while concepts and

theory are important, "real-world" situations predominate and strongly dictate how businesses are operated. Students need to know the theory and concepts, but they also need to know actual examples and how the theory and practice relate. Critical incidents and case studies are the ideal venue to enhance that relationship. There is great flexibility in linking theory and practice to specific situations from relatively straightforward and single issue focused information, like a critical incident, to much more complex and interactive scenarios like a case study.

In writing a critical incident or case study, the integration and application of specific theories or concepts is important. In order to satisfy specific learning objectives in a course or class, a conceptual foundation can help to frame the entire scenario or situation. Part of the critical incident or case writing process is the development of teaching notes. It is within the teaching notes that the conceptual framework and theory is presented. When other professors consider adopting a critical incident or case, they need to know what concepts and/or theories are addressed so decisions can be made regarding how the assignment fits into the course structure.

Completing a research study on a critical incident or case study gives the opportunity for the best of both research methods. The researcher has to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of relevant theoretical concepts without the necessity of developing an exhaustive theoretical study. The researcher also creates a field-based, practical study along the lines of empirical research without the need for complex statistical testing and analysis.

There are many types of research from original theory-based to empirical to practical. Critical incident research would not usually be classified as scholarship of discovery that includes original research that advances knowledge. However, scholarship of application is certainly relevant. Application can be defined as involving the rigor and application of disciplinary expertise with results that can be shared with and/or evaluated by peers (Boyer, 1990).

Real World Experiences for Students

Students seem to gravitate to critical incident or case study assignments and opportunities. They are generally limited in their interaction with "real-world" experiences since there have not been a lot of opportunities for most students to establish a professional career. Critical incidents or case studies can almost become internships in the classroom. Students are introduced to practical scenarios or circumstances similar to what they could experience in their professional careers while still benefiting from the learning environment of the academic institution.

The critical incident or case study is also like a lab exercise where students can experiment with a controlled situation under the guidance of a faculty professor. The students are also with their peers, who can enhance understanding and reinforce learning as issues of the critical incident are debated and discussed. There is a real opportunity for a win-win as professors can offer a viable teaching instrument and students generally enjoy the experience and learn theoretical concepts with a practical application.

IMPORTANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Members of the Christian Business Faculty Association are in a unique position to benefit from the additional Christian perspective as applied to this research method. It is like the critical incident or case study research can be taken to a higher level with the additional consideration of Christian values and principles and how they apply to the real-world scenario. Potentially, the theme of ethics in the secular world would be an equivalent to the Christian values; however, Christian principles go beyond just ethics to consider an entire lifestyle and behavioral practices in a business. Issues like servant leadership, customer service, and honest weights and measures are just some examples of Christian principles that can be brought out in a critical incident.

Opportunity to Feature Christian Businesses

One of the greatest benefits of critical incident research is interacting with leaders in Christian businesses. After working with more than 30 Christian businesses, lasting friendships have been made with a great appreciation of these professional individuals and the challenges they face on a daily basis. There is a foundational Christian relationship that helps to create a collegial environment throughout the research process.

Asking a business leader to expose his/her business to extra public scrutiny can be intimidating; however, these leaders often recognize a greater good. Having the occasion to share their Christian values with like-minded students becomes a mentoring opportunity. In the effort to advance their Christian values and principles these leaders are willing to share their story. They want to make students aware of potential pitfalls and hazards to make it easier for their success as professionals to be Christian leaders to change the world.

Christian business leaders have essentially the same challenges and opportunities as non-Christian leaders. Therefore, critical incidents and case studies for Christian businesses can be applicable for almost any situation. It is the added dimension of the process of dealing with the

dilemma from a Christian perspective that gives greater depth and substance to these scenarios.

Provides Christian Universities with Functional Teaching Tools

Completing critical incidents and case studies from Christian-based businesses provides a valuable resource for your university. With so many secular textbooks and supplementary materials, there is a lack of Christian-based assessments for use in the classroom. There is a ready-made audience for these critical incidents amongst your colleagues within your university and at other Christian-based universities.

Through organizations like Christian Business Faculty Association (CBFA) and publications like the *Christian Business Academy Review* (*CBAR*) there can be quick and efficient dissemination of critical incident publications to those in need. There is even the potential for revenue generation as these products have a market value as supplemental materials in a course.

Successful publication of critical incidents and case studies can bring notoriety to you and your university. Such recognition can lead to additional research and publication opportunities. Indirectly, there can also be positive responses and recognition toward the Christian business. Again, this provides a win situation for all parties involved.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLICATION

Ideally, in the development of a critical incident for publication purposes, the author should first seek an acceptance with a nationally recognized peer reviewed journal like *CBAR*. Following this publication, follow-up publications can be achieved through textbooks or even a book of cases and critical incidents. Textbook authors will even seek out authors of critical incidents and request to include their critical incident in a text. It is not often that a researcher can get multiple publications from one scholarly endeavor.

CBAR *Case Studies*

There are a number of academic journals that would be ideal sources of publication beginning with one of the signature journals of the Christian Business Faculty Association, the *Christian Business Academy Review* (*CBAR*). This journal features a section entitled "Creative Instruction," which is defined as follows: "cases, innovations in pedagogy, materials, and methods for teaching undergraduate and graduate business students." The focus on case promotion is evident, and each edition generally has one or two case studies included in its publication.

Case-Based Professional Organizations

The Society for Case Research (SCR) is a national professional case organization that meets twice a year in a collaborative environment to promote the development of cases and critical incidents. There are many other national and international case-based and professional organizations that promote the development and publication of case studies and feature journals. Some of the leading case based organizations are the North American Case Research Association (NACRA), Southeastern Case Research Association (SECRA), Western Case Association (WCA), Southwest Case Research Association (SWCRA), and CASE.

Journal of Critical Incidents

The Society for Case Research (SCR) has three journals, including the *Journal of Critical Incidents* (*JCI*). This is the only case organization that features a journal specifically oriented to critical incidents. JCI is a blind peer-reviewed journal that goes through three review cycles with a goal to complete the publication process in less than one year. In Chicago each spring, the organization also a conference that is primarily devoted to the development and publication of critical incidents. SCR serves as an excellent training ground to become familiar and comfortable with writing critical incidents and getting them published in a timely fashion.

Textbooks

In addition, critical incidents and cases are in demand by authors of textbooks. Many textbook authors desire to have case studies as part of the end of chapter materials. In some textbooks, especially at the graduate level, there are only cases used for assignment purposes. These books sometimes even use the term "text and cases" in the title. Often textbook authors will present a one- or two-paragraph scenario and call this a case, and it is really nothing more than a problem. Critical incidents provide an ideal venue for the end-of-chapter case study assignment for all levels of study. A critical incident is much more detailed and complex than a one- or two-paragraph problem and less complicated and complex than a full-blown and lengthy case study. They are a natural fit for a textbook presentation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to make you familiar with a critical incident. A critical incident is a shorter and less complicated version of a case study that retains essentially all the values and benefits of a case study. Getting involved

in researching and writing a critical incident is a relatively easy process that can have immediate benefits not only to you but to students, peers, your university, and to business leaders. Focusing on critical incidents for businesses practicing Christian values and principles is a natural venue that can have lasting benefits and opportunities. Organizations like CBFA provide a number of valuable outlets for critical incident research, and there are several professional organizations whose sole focus is case and critical incident research and publication. For faculty seeking publication opportunities, which is critical for tenure purposes, critical incidents are a worthy consideration.

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