What Business Cases Reveal That Best Practices Hide

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That is one of the reasons business books can be both useful and misleading at the same time. A case study can inspire. It can expand the imagination. It can show what is possible. But it can also tempt leaders into a familiar mistake: taking another organization’s visible solution and treating it as if it were transferable on its own.

A company adopts agile teams.
Another introduces a new performance system.
A third reorganizes around the customer.
A fourth removes hierarchy and gives more autonomy.

These moves may have worked somewhere. But the real question is not whether they worked there.

The real question is: What pattern made them work there?

That is what business cases reveal when they are used properly. They do not merely show what another organization did. They help leaders see the deeper combination of conditions that made a particular action effective, ineffective, necessary, premature, or even destructive.

This is why business cases matter.

And this is also why they should not be treated as recipes.

The danger of reading cases as templates

Many leaders approach cases with an understandable impulse:

“Show me what successful organizations do.”

That sounds practical. But it can quickly become superficial.
When leaders read a case only for the visible move, they tend to focus on the action instead of the pattern behind it. They see the structure, but not the operating logic. They see the intervention, but not the maturity level. They see the leadership language, but not the cultural conditions that made it credible. They see the innovation, but not the capabilities that allowed it to emerge.

This is how imitation begins.

And imitation is risky.
A team model that works in a capabilities-based organization may fail in a rules-based one.
A delegation practice that works in a mature organization may overwhelm a growth-stage company.
A performance dialogue that works in a high-trust culture may create fear in a low-trust one.
A customer-centric redesign that works in one sector may generate fragmentation in another.

The visible action may look attractive. The hidden conditions may be completely different.

That is why copying best practice so often disappoints.

It takes what is visible and ignores what is structural.

Good business cases show the pattern, not just the move

A useful business case does more than tell a story.

It reveals a configuration.

It shows how strategy, business model, leadership style, organizational form, management context, capabilities, and

growth stage interact. It helps the reader understand not only what happened, but what kind of organization was able to make that happen.

This is the contribution of Patterns of Mastery.

The book uses 21 business cases not as isolated examples, but as clusters of dominant characteristics. These cases represent typical patterns across management styles, growth stages, and industries. They are interpreted through the Capability Profile and Leadership Scorecard, so leaders can move beyond anecdote and toward structured observation.

That is a fundamentally different use of the business case.

The goal is not admiration.
The goal is not imitation.
The goal is recognition.

Leaders should be able to say:

“We are not that company, but we recognize parts of ourselves in this pattern.”

Or:

“We thought we had an innovation problem, but this case shows we may actually have a capability barrier.”

Or:

“This case looks successful on the surface, but it reveals a tension we also carry.”

That is when a business case becomes useful. Not when it tells leaders what to copy, but when it helps them see their own organization more clearly.

A case is most useful when it creates comparison

The real power of a business case lies in comparison.

Comparison is not about benchmarking in the narrow sense. It is not about finding out who is better. It is about making differences visible.

Without comparison, leaders often remain trapped inside their own assumptions.

They normalize bureaucracy because it has always been there.
They normalize slow decisions because everyone is busy.
They normalize weak collaboration because silos are expected.
They normalize low innovation because the sector is “difficult.”
They normalize disengagement because pressure is high everywhere.

A business case interrupts this normalization.

It shows that organizations with similar size, stage, sector, or complexity can still operate in very different ways. It shows that some barriers are not inevitable. It shows that what feels “normal” may actually be a repeated pattern produced by management choices.

That makes comparison valuable.

Not because it tells leaders what they should become.

But because it helps them see what they have accepted without noticing.

Why typical patterns are more useful than heroic stories

There is another reason why business cases are often unhelpful: they are told as heroic stories.

They celebrate a founder, a CEO, a turnaround, a transformation, or a bold decision. They imply that success came from vision, courage, or exceptional execution alone.

There is nothing wrong with recognizing leadership. But heroic stories often hide the system.

They make organizations sound more coherent than they are.
They underplay contradictions.
They simplify the path.
They focus on decisive moments and ignore the conditions that made those moments possible.

The result is inspiration without diagnostic value.

Typical patterns are more useful.

A typical pattern does not pretend that one organization has discovered the universal answer. It shows what tends to happen under certain conditions. It reveals recurring strengths, recurring barriers, and recurring tensions. It gives leaders a more grounded way to interpret their own organization.

This is why the concept of typology matters so much.

A typology does not reduce organizations to a stereotype. It gives leaders a disciplined way to ask:

Which dominant pattern are we closest to?
What strengths come with that pattern?
What capability barriers typically accompany it?
What development path does this suggest?

Those are far more valuable questions than:

What did that admired company do last year?

Business cases help leaders see what they cannot easily see alone

Every organization has blind spots.

Some are caused by habit.
Some by power.
Some by success.
Some by overconfidence.
Some by the fact that leaders tend to hire and promote people with similar assumptions and mental models.

Over time, this creates a narrowing effect. What is familiar begins to look inevitable. What is misaligned begins to feel acceptable. What is dysfunctional becomes part of “how we do things here.”

Business cases, when interpreted properly, help leaders step outside that circle.

They allow leaders to see their organization from a slight distance.

Not as an abstraction.
Not as a diagnosis imposed from outside.

But as a pattern that can be compared with other patterns.

This is especially important in areas that are difficult to observe directly: leadership, culture, capability development, operating logic, and growth-stage tensions.

These are rarely visible in conventional reports. But they become more visible when leaders can compare their own organization with structured cases that show how such dynamics typically come together.

From business case to self-recognition

The most useful moment in reading a business case is not agreement.

It is recognition.

It is the moment a leader sees something uncomfortable but true.

The company may not be in the same industry.
It may not be the same size.
It may not share the same ownership structure.
It may not face the same market.

And yet the pattern feels familiar.

A growth-stage company sees how new managers are slowly destroying the energy that created early success.

A mature organization sees how systems that once enabled coordination are now turning into red tape.

A change-based organization sees that repeated restructuring is draining focus rather than improving responsiveness.

An engagement-based organization sees that strong people are compensating for weak systems.

A capabilities-based organization sees that success depends on preserving a delicate balance between freedom and control.

This is where the case becomes a mirror.

And once leaders can recognize themselves in the mirror, the conversation changes. It becomes less about abstract

improvement and more about specific barriers, tensions, and options.

Cases should lead to questions, not conclusions

The wrong use of a business case is to jump from reading to action.

The better use is to let the case generate better questions.

What dominant pattern does our organization most closely resemble?
What capability barriers are typical for that pattern?
Where are we similar, and where are we different?
What strengths are we underusing?
What tensions are we normalizing?
What development path fits our actual situation rather than our aspirations alone?

These questions matter because they slow leaders down in a productive way.

Instead of asking, “What should we implement next?”
They ask, “What are we really dealing with?”

That is a much stronger basis for action.
In practice, many failed interventions are not wrong in themselves. They are mistimed, misapplied, or misaligned. A business case helps reduce that risk by restoring context.

The first step: create your own Organization Twin

The most practical way to use a business case is not to start with someone else’s organization.

It is to create a clearer view of your own.

That first step is to create your own Organization Twin.

Through a Structured Reflection—a standardized online questionnaire that takes about 15 minutes—you create an initial

evidence-based representation of how your organization currently works.

This produces two practical lenses:

The Capability Profile, which makes visible your broader organizational pattern: strategy, business model, organizational form, management context, growth stage, operating capabilities, and competitive barriers.

The Leadership Scorecard, which reveals how systems, leadership, culture, and success interact, and whether the organization supports understanding, thinking, delivery, engagement, and meaningful boundaries.

Together, they allow leaders to read the book's business cases differently.

Not as distant examples.
Not as attractive stories.
Not as models to copy.

But as points of comparison.

That comparison then becomes the basis for a Guided Clarity Session, where leaders can examine what their own pattern reveals before deciding what to change.

Business cases are most useful when they create clarity

The best business case does not tell leaders what to do.

It helps them see what they are dealing with.

That may sound modest. It is not.

In management, clarity is often more valuable than borrowed certainty. Once leaders can see the pattern they are in, they stop reaching for fashionable solutions that do not fit. They begin to identify the actual barriers to performance, growth, innovation, and coordination. They become more precise in how they interpret success and failure. And they become less vulnerable to the illusion that every admired practice can be transplanted.

That is why business cases still matter.

Not because they offer best practice.

But because, when used well, they reveal what best practice usually hides:
context, conditions, tensions, barriers, and the pattern that makes one organization fundamentally different from another.

And that is where better leadership begins.

About Management Insights

Founded by Lukas Michel, Management Insights draws on more than 25 years of research and practice to help people understand how their organizations work. The Organization Twin brings organizational patterns into view for reflection, dialogue, and informed choice.

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