



## Crack the Case Workshop Pre-Read

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Did you know that case interview prep can accelerate your understanding of business? That's right, solving short business problems regularly can help you think faster in class, prep you for your next job and help you do better in a wide array of interviews. As we work together in our *Crack the Case* workshop, my job is to help you learn how to solve cases and see their value.

If you've done a case before, you know they typically consist of either a simple logic or market sizing problem (e.g. how many toothbrushes are sold each year in the US) or a more complex business problem, like helping a cell phone company develop a strategy for a new product. As you tackle these problems, here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

- 1. You will be doing case interviews for many years.** Case interviews are showing up in all sorts of interviews now. They permeate many post MBA interviews and also show up in many advanced level interviews. Many mid-level manager and executive interviews will require you to outline your approach to a current business issue. So as you practice your cases, focus on building long term skills that you'll use over many years.
- 2. Solving cases will be a part of your job.** Interviewers like case interviews because they allow the interviewer to "test drive" your problem solving skills. If you get the job, you will be solving analytical problems on a daily basis.
- 3. Case interviews pull together your B-school knowledge.** I can't count the number of times people have said to me, "David, this workshop really helped me pull together everything I'm learning in B-school." I wish I could take all the credit, but practicing cases naturally drives you to integrate your business knowledge. By thinking through multiple business scenarios and solving a variety of business problems, you build analytical and integrations skills.

### Our Workshop Agendas

We'll be meeting together two times. For our first session, we'll:

- **Practice structuring and asking questions.** Interviewers want to know how you think and like to see how you break down problems. Learning how to do that leads to asking good questions. We'll practice both skills quite a bit.

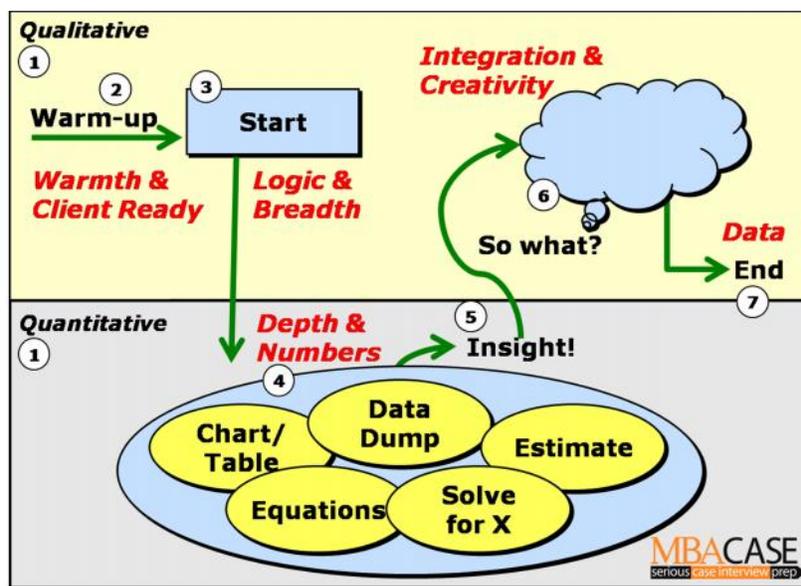
- **Review all the case types you'll likely encounter.** These cases include market sizing, mini-business/resume cases and full business cases. I want to make sure you understand how they are structured and what you need to do to succeed.
- **Practice each type of case individually.** You will be given many opportunities to participate in the group and with practice partners. Several times we will break into groups of two so you can apply what you are learning.
- **Strengthen communication skills.** To do well you'll need to be talking, showing your work and explaining your thinking. Building these skills takes time.

The second time we meet, we'll be going deeper with our cases by looking at more data and reviewing important skills like note taking, reading slides, asking great questions and managing your data. We'll focus on current events and also narrow our cases by function, like operations, marketing or finance. You'll have the chance to practice more and take your basic skills to a new level.

### MBACASE Path

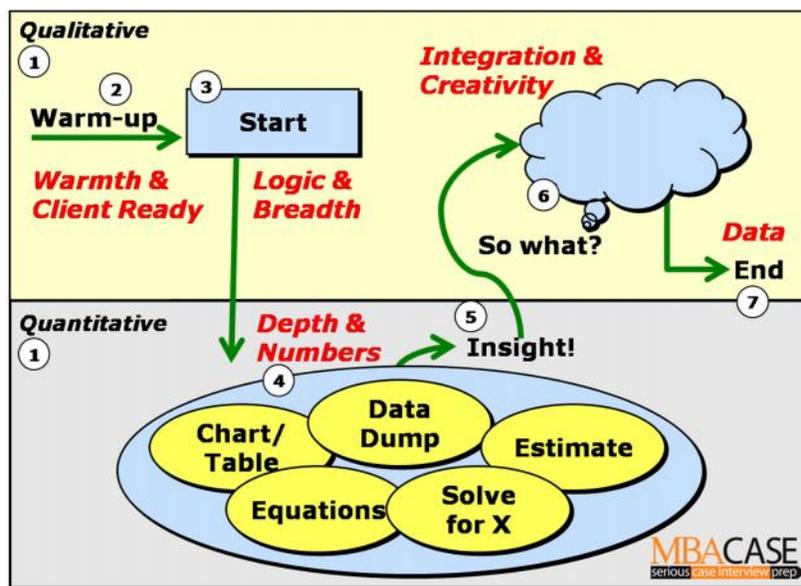
To optimize your learning during the Crack the Case workshop, you should be familiar with one of the main diagrams we'll be using that day, the "MBACASE Path." All case interviews, whether very detailed analyses or more general discussions, follow a similar path. By isolating each step, you can build your skills in each area. Doing well in a case interview is not magic. Nor is it a form of luck that only a few candidates possess. Instead, it's the result of hard work and careful practice. Plan to take your case interviews seriously and you'll do well. Let's go through each step of the MBACASE Path.

### MBACASE Path



1. **Qualitative and Quantitative Zones.** You will move back and forth between these two areas throughout the case. In the chart, they are shown as yellow and grey zones on the top and bottom. In the qualitative zone (yellow) you'll be expected to use good logic, break concepts and problems into small pieces and integrate your ideas with the data toward the end of the case. In the quantitative zone (grey) you'll be expected to show a high level of comfort with numbers, and a keen ability to estimate the financial impact of a decision. In both zones, the interviewer has similar expectations of you: to communicate clearly what you are doing, and to break-down concepts and numbers in a systematic, logical manner.

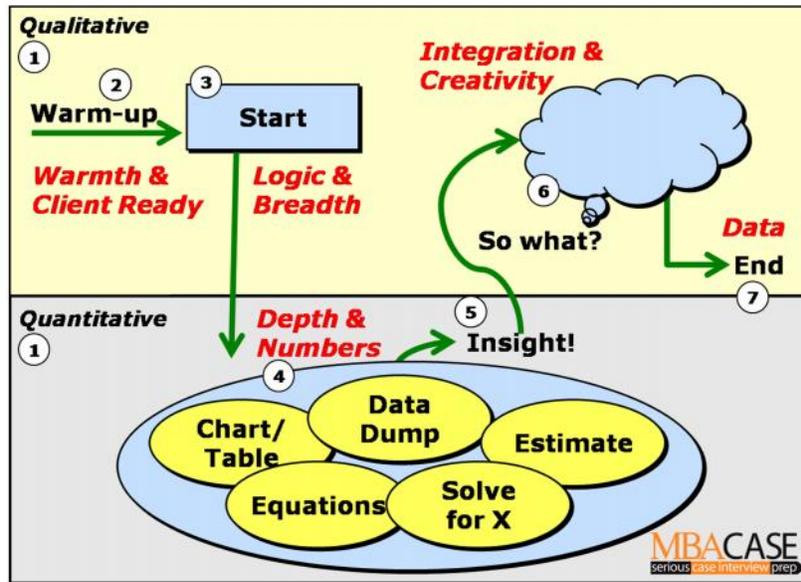
### MBACASE Path



- **Numbers (1-7).** Each of the circled numbers represents a step along the MBACASE Path. We'll cover each one in detail below.
- **Red Lettered Words.** These phrases, for instance "Warmth & Client Ready", represent what the interviewer expects from you at each step.

- Warm-up.** Every case begins with some kind of conversation. Whether it's a quick hello followed by a brusque "let's get started on the case" comment from your interviewer, or a more lengthy 5-10 minute discussion of your background, you need to do your best to warm-up the conversation. You are being evaluated from the moment you meet the interviewer. Often this pre-case discussion sets the tone for the rest of the interview.

### MBACASE Path



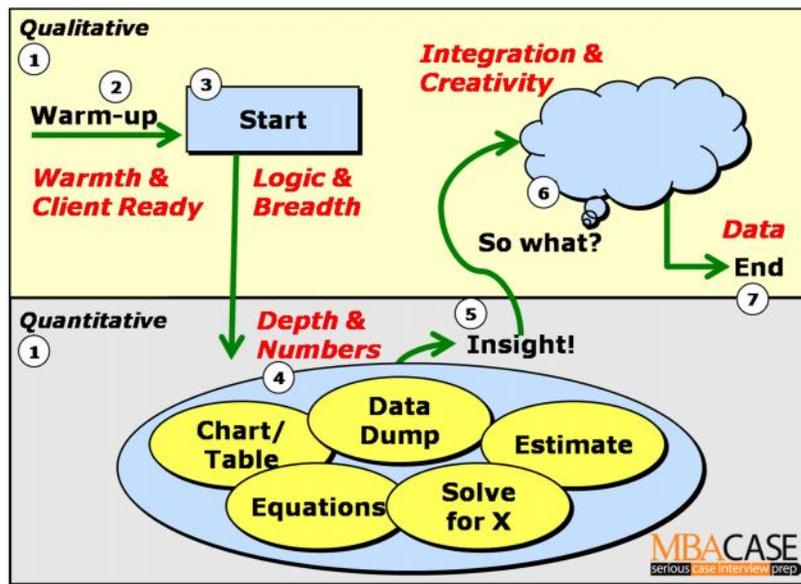
- What does the interviewer expect?** Energy, confidence and an interest in joining his or her firm are high on the list. Guess what? Your interviewer does not care that much about your general career goals ("I'm so excited about health care . . ."). Instead he will be most interested in your desire to join his specific firm or company. Your interviewer is also very interested in your ability to communicate clearly. As a newly-minted MBA you'll be expected to communicate across a wide variety of contexts: small internal meetings, client meetings, large client presentations and day to day updates. The interviewer will be judging your ability to express your thoughts using clear, prioritized points.
- Your challenge.** Most interviewers interview 10-12 people in one day. It will be easy for you to blend into the crowd. Also, since your interviewer is looking for flaws (sorry – it's just the nature of the process), you could be setting his mind against you before the case begins. Finally, the length of the warm-up varies, so you need to be ready for a short or extended discussion.
- Your advantage.** You are an expert on the subject of yourself and the questions are highly predictable. At some point during the interview process you will be

asked to give examples of leadership, persuasiveness, teamwork skills and how you overcame a personal challenge. You'll also need to explain your previous work experience and your career aspirations. With practice you can master all of these topics.

- **How to prepare.**
  - **Know the “why?” behind each decision on your resume.** Think through the major decisions behind each experience on your resume (e.g. switching jobs or living abroad) and be ready to explain your choices.
  - **Use numbers and bulleted lists to keep your answers tight.** As you practice your answers to common questions, like “why our company?” break your responses down into pieces. It's much easier to follow someone's explanation when she says “I had two main responsibilities . . .” vs. “Well, let me tell you I had a lot to do . . . .”

3. **Start the Case.** Your interviewer will lay out a situation or problem you need to solve. For the MBA, this problem usually will be a business situation (versus a market-sizing or brainteaser question). This moment is when you need to lay out some kind of structure for solving the case. I'm not a fan of classic, pre-memorized frameworks (I discuss that issue in my book *Crack the Case System*) as I find they make you sound stilted and rigid in your thinking. The interviewers tend to find them off-putting as well. Instead, think of this as an opportunity to show off your careful listening skills and your ability to structure your thoughts in a logical manner.

### MBACASE Path



- **What does the interviewer expect?** First and foremost is structure. She is test-driving your ability to analyze problems and is evaluating how you would approach an analytical problem on a real case. She expects you to be thorough, logical and prioritized as you explain your approach to solving the problem.
- **Your challenge.** There are multiple ways to start any single case. You will never know if you have a complete structure in place or if you missed a critical point. You will feel pressured between trying to think strategically and doing detailed, quantitative problems. Did I also mention you need to be talking and explaining your thoughts about 90% of the time? Listening, taking notes, structuring and presenting your ideas is a unique challenge.
- **Your advantage.** Most business case problems can be broken down into several large categories like profit improvement, mergers, new product launches and divestitures, to name a few. Since any business can be analyzed by looking at the

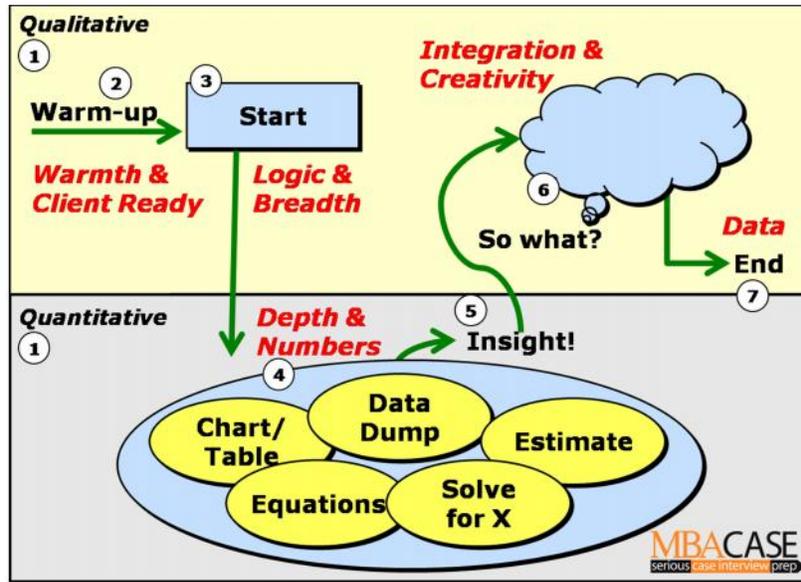
revenue and cost drivers, you will become very proficient at understanding the root causes of problems quickly. After practicing 30-50 cases, you will see many of the same themes repeat.

- **How to prepare.** Learning how to start cases is the most critical part of doing well, and the most time-consuming. I can only highlight here some of what we'll cover during the workshop. You can also learn much through reading high quality case materials.
  - **Invest the time.** Interviewers are looking for you to show your ability to think and communicate while solving a variety of problems. They want to see how you respond to challenging situations because that is what you'll face on a daily basis if they hire you. To best prepare, you'll need to assess your own "soft" spots, or weak areas, and work on improving those areas. For instance, if you have trouble with operations cases, you'll need to invest more time on that topic.
  - **Develop an integrated and holistic framework.** Instead of trying to memorize a large number of very specific frameworks to solve each case problem type, it is better to fully understand the value drivers of all businesses. Once you have mastered them and can think through them in an integrated manner quickly, you can solve any case and discuss any topic.
  - **Drill on your starts.** Consider practicing your starts until they get much better. I recommend this drill:
    1. Find a variety of cases (10-15) that lay out a question, but may not have very detailed answers or accompanying data handouts. Do not use more difficult cases at this point. Since you are trying to build basic "start" skills, we want to save those more difficult cases for later when you are more comfortable with cases.
    2. Read the case out loud like an interviewer would.
    3. Now play yourself, the interviewee, and recap the case briefly by stating the situation, problem and your assignment. Interviewers do not want to hear the entire case problem restated. Ask for a minute and put together your plan.
    4. On your paper, lay out a simple structure for how you would like to think through solving this case. You may want to also write down facts you'll need, questions you want to ask and quantitative data you'll be requesting. This "quiet time" period should take only 45 seconds to a minute.
    5. Present your plan to the invisible interviewer. You can use a mirror to better see how you look when you present your plan.

Better yet, use a video camera! By presenting these starts for a wide variety of cases, you'll build skills quickly.

- Data Pool (blue oval).** It's time to dive in! Almost every case will have some type of analytical task. Your new post-MBA job will likely require you to use your analytical skills often, so your interviewer will want to test those skills to some degree. There is a large variation in the type of analytical problems you'll be expected to solve.

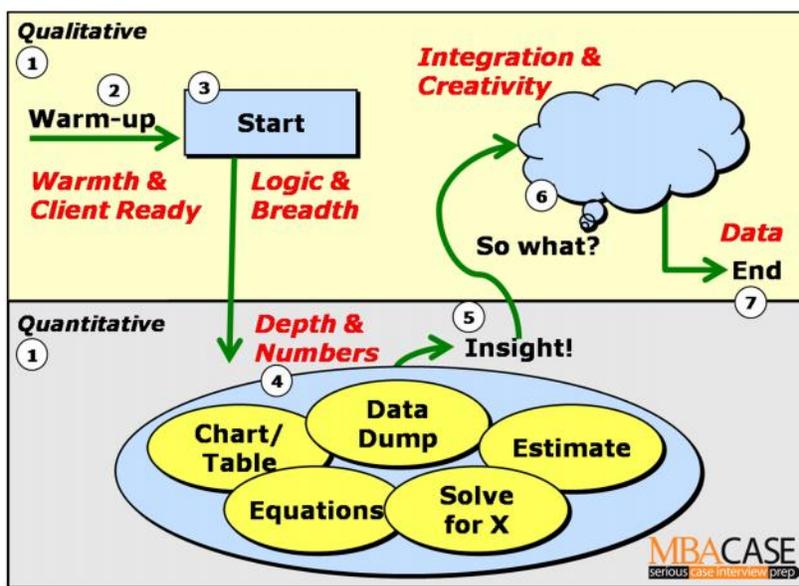
### MBACASE Path



- What does the interviewer expect?** Comfort with numbers and a strong degree of accuracy are important. Your interviewer is not likely to “ding” or reject you because of a simple math error, but if you continue to confuse scale, make multiple computation errors or cannot set up simple equations, your chances of passing to the next round drop significantly.
- Your challenge.** Since you cannot be sure of the type of math problem you'll receive, you need to practice a wide variety. One interviewer might expect you to lay out and solve an algebraic equation and the next might ask you to interpret a slide. You will need to review a wide variety of problems by practicing a lot of cases.
- Your advantage.** You already have most of these analytical skills. By reviewing basic math concepts and honing in on weak areas, you can sharpen your math skills quickly.

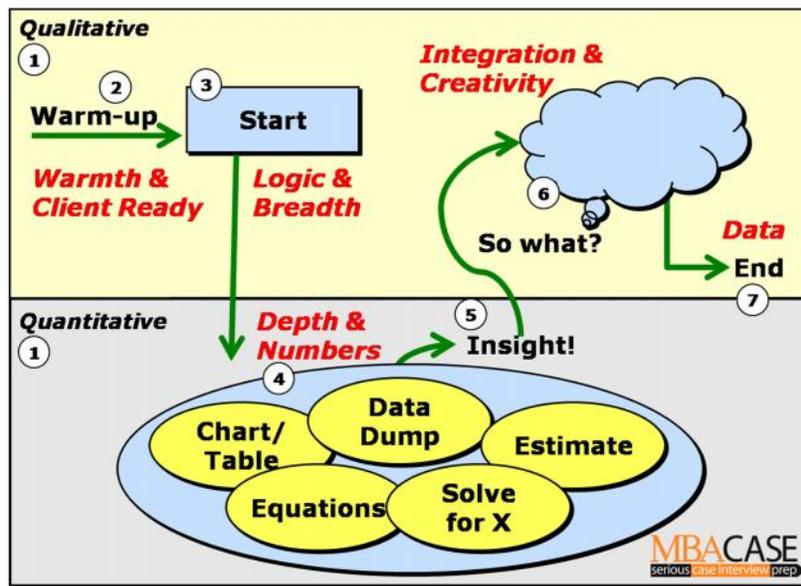
- **How to prepare.**
    - **Start with basic math.** Review the basics of multiplication, division, fractions and scale. Most people make mistakes when the numbers are in billions and millions and thousands in the same case, so be sure to be comfortable with these scales.
    - **Practice common formulas.** You'll sometimes need to solve for a variable or write out a break-even equation. Keep track of the most common equations you see in cases and learn them well.
    - **Pick up your speed with estimates.** Learning how to "ballpark" your numbers is a great asset for any case. You'll save yourself a lot of time, and the embarrassment of making simple mistakes, if you can estimate and round numbers quickly.
    - **Know your charts.** Some companies are more chart or handout heavy than others and tend to show you several diagrams during the case. Review basic supply and demand charts as well as others like stack bars, pie charts and line graphs. You'll need to be comfortable discussing these charts out loud and explaining the main insights.
5. **Insight!** After you dazzle the interviewer with your quick math and sharp chart-reading skills, you'll need to have an insight. Now it's time to climb out of the data pool (was it a leisurely swim or did you drown?) and show the interviewer your main insight. Every analytical section eventually transitions to a point when the interviewer will want you to interpret the data. Be ready to state clearly what the insights are by practicing data interpretation with all of your cases.

### MBACASE Path



6. **So what?** In the beginning of the case you were given a problem to solve. At this point in the case you'll be expected to share how the analytical insight or insights you found tie back to the main question of the case. Since your interviewer will likely be a bottom line impact kind of guy or gal, be ready to answer the "so what?" question. In other words, you discovered an insight, but how does it have any impact on the subject at hand? As you do more cases, finding the insight and explaining its meaning will likely become your favorite part of the case. For example, finding out that prices were lowered and that volume for the product didn't go up might indicate that the company made a strategic error. They may be able to now return prices to their earlier level, or better yet, raise them, and volume will not suffer.

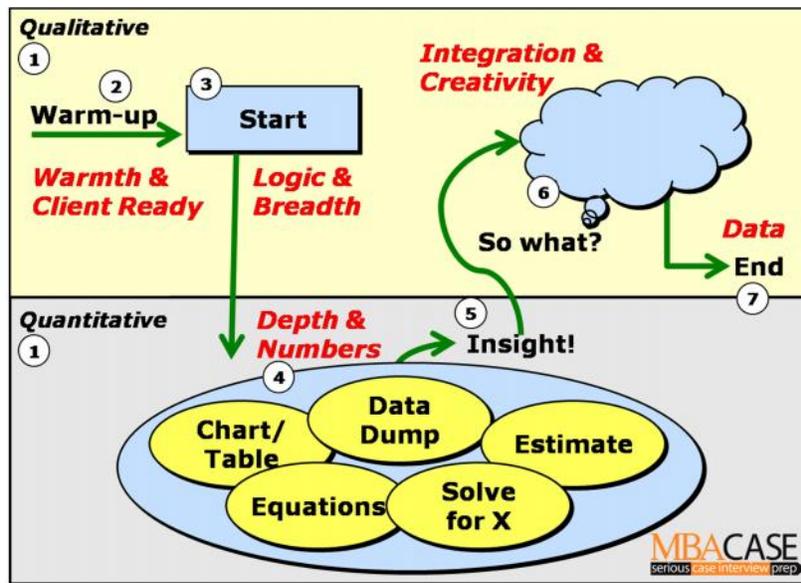
### MBA CASE Path



- **What does the interviewer expect?** Structure again is at the top of the list. Most interviewers do not plan to hand out job offers to the lucky candidates who guess the main insight of the case. Instead, interviewers want to see the same great structuring skills that they saw in the beginning of the case. They want to see your analytical insights fitting back into your plan. If the discussion moves to brainstorming solutions, they'll want to hear again how you would break down the options into smaller pieces.
- **Your challenge.** Thinking on your feet mid-case and coming up with insights and structure is very challenging. You'll be expected to integrate several ideas at this point in the case while discussing them with your interviewer.

- **Your advantage.** Since many of the business problems you are solving revolve around profit drivers and basic decisions (e.g. expand the business or contract the business), you'll run across a high number of repeating themes. As you do more cases, finding the insight and transitioning to the "so what" will become easier.
  - **How to prepare.** Building insight and integration skills takes time and experience. To build some mental "muscle memory", and to build your confidence in explaining the connections, review many cases and practice them several times. You'll be surprised at the repeating themes across cases.
7. **End.** Finally, you get to end your case. Doing well at the close of the case is usually dependent upon doing well during the earlier parts of the case. If you created a strong structure in the beginning, discovered some analytical insights in the middle and developed a well integrated conclusion, ending the case is quite simple.

### MBACASE Path



- **What does the interviewer expect?** Data and structure are still important here. As you conclude, your interviewer will want to hear you use the facts and data from the case to reach your conclusion. She will also want to hear some form of an "elevator pitch". In other words, "the CEO will be here in a minute, what do you want to tell him?" Speaking in a succinct, structured manner will be critical to making your points and to doing well.

- **Your challenge.** Your head will likely be spinning by the time you reach the end of the case. Good cases typically have lots of layers and analytical challenges which can be tough to pull together. If the earlier parts of the case did not go well, it's difficult to close well.
- **Your advantage.** Since you are building skills that will help you with the earlier parts of the case, your close will be a natural continuation of those parts. The more you practice your starts and your analytical skills, the easier it will be to end your cases.
- **How to prepare.** You'll want to spend the majority of your time practicing steps 1 to 6 on the MBACASE path to increase your odds of having a good conclusion to each case. Once you can consistently integrate your ideas with most of your cases, keep these tips in mind:
  - **Make distinct points.** You need to end with a firm recommendation. Suggesting "more analysis" typically sounds weak. Be ready to give a clear decision about the problem you were given.
  - **Integrate your data.** Proving that you used numbers to come to your conclusion is important. By showing one last time how the data drove the decision, you'll display your analytical skills.
  - **Be confident.** Even if you had a few problems during the case, deliver your conclusion with confidence. It's your last chance to make a lasting impression.

Thanks for taking the time to prepare in advance. Plan to think through each section and plan to participate in the workshop. You will have many chances to participate and the more you do, the more you'll learn. I look forward to working with you at the *Crack the Case* workshop and helping you take your case skills to the next level.