

**OBTC 2015 at University of La Verne**

**June 17th – 20th, 2015**

Submission Template

SUBMISSION GUIDANCE

*\* Remove all identifying properties from this document \**

*\* All files must be saved in PDF format \**

*\*Please include ALL supplementary text at the end of this document\* \*Only one document should be submitted\**

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| **Submission Template for the****2015 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators** |

1. **Title of Proposal:**

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| Was groupthink responsible for three deaths? Examining the complexities and dynamic nature of “real-world” decision-making. |

1. **Abstract:**

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| In a Pulitzer prize-winning article, the actions of the Stevens Pass Marketing Director that led to a 2010 avalanche in the backcountry of a Washington State ski resort is documented. In debriefing the thirteen surviving skiers, symptoms of groupthink and other cognitive biases emerge that led professional skiers to trigger an avalanche on the back side of a mountain killing three of them. Could anything have stopped this tragedy? In this session, participants will be actively involved in a shortened form of the Tunnel Creek case analysis and then engage in a short case debrief. Case teaching notes will also be shared. |

**3) Keywords:**

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| *Decision making, group think, gender roles, cognitive biases, peer pressure, social dynamics in groups* |

1. **Format**

 x Activity or exercise

 Discussion roundtable (60 minute only)

 General discussion session

1. **Time Requested:**

 30 Minutes

 x 60 Minutes (*Roundtables must select 60 minutes*)

 90 Minutes

1. **Planning Details:**

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| I will need a projector and computer access to show a brief video and slides that can be used for classroom discussion. (The link to the video is readily available and embedded in the NY Times article.) |

1. **Learning Objectives or Goals for the Session:**
	* Introduce a non-traditional article – NY Times Pulitzer prize winning article on an avalanche at Stevens Pass WA/Tunnel Creek - as a business school case as an example of what really happens in the “throes of decision making” and the resulting consequences
* Teach the impact of decision blinders, social dynamics, gender and group think in a case that students enjoy, leading to a robust discussion about the deleterious effects of peer pressure and cognitive biases on decision-making
* Provide a case that shows the immediate consequences of inadequate decision making
* Provide session participants with author-developed case teaching notes

**7)** **Management or Teaching Topics:**

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| * *Organization behavior (group decision making; groupthink, management of agreement, social dynamics in groups and decision making. biases in perception, the impact of peer pressure have on group decision making)*
* *Organization theory (decision making with uncertainty)*
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1. **Session Description and Plan:**

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| * During the first 5 minutes a very brief video from *the New York Times Tunnel Creek* article will be shown.
* During the next 10 minutes each participant will receive an in-depth description of one of the 16 skiers who were on the fateful ski trip along with a definition of the four decision blinders portrayed in *Decisions without Blinders* ” (Bazerman and Chugh, HBR, 1/06).
	+ Depending on the number of participants, small groups will be formed to identify skier’s decision blinders
* For the next 20 minutes, each person (or team) will be asked to describe what blinder(s) their skier manifested.
* All four of the blinders - failures to see, seek, use or share information - are readily apparent in the article
* The consequences of their actions become readily apparent: blinders enabled some of the best freestyle skiers in the world to ski down the back side of a mountain *known for its avalanches* the morning after a 32 inch snowfall – another predictor of avalanches - when a couple of them had already experienced “loose snow” earlier in the day.
* The next 10 minutes will focus on the relevant groupthink symptoms, social dynamics and gender roles that emerge during the debriefing.
* “A group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing… Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions… A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background…” Janus 1972.
* Groupthink emerges when unexamined acceptance of opinion occurs often through consensus or satisficing, which lacks critical thinking or an evaluation of consequences or alternatives. It is often characterized by self-deception.
* An example comes from the comments of Megan Michaelson, the ESPN.com freestyle ski editor who covered the Stevens Pass week-end event:

“If it was up to me, I would never have gone backcountry skiing with 12 people. That’s just way too many. But there were sort of the social dynamics of that — where I didn’t want to be the one to say, you know, ‘Hey, this is too big a group and we shouldn’t be doing this.’ I was invited by someone else, so I didn’t want to stand up and cause a fuss. And *not to play the gender card*, but there were 2 girls and 10 guys, and *I didn’t want to be the whiny female figure, you know?* So I just followed along.”* The last ten minutes will focus on how to use this case in class including key questions to stimulate discussion and class slides to identify key concepts
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1. **For Activities and Exercises:**

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| A description of each of the skiers will be provided and serve the basis of discussion so a reading of the case is not necessary. However it would be ideal if the link were available so anyone interested could the Tunnel Creek article prior to the session. (Perhaps if this gets accepted, the link could be included with the abstract).  |

1. **Implications for Teaching or for Teachers:**
* Students underestimate the role and importance of decision-making in companies. Having won a Pulitzer, the Tunnel Creek article is compelling and includes video from head cams on the day of the avalanche. Additionally, it is less boring than some of the other material they read for class.
* Students are engaged because the can see themselves in this type of situation as they ponder how smart, athletic professionals could ignore the warnings about the recent snowfall and the dangers of human-triggered avalanches to become a part of a group that makes some unspoken decisions with tragic consequences.

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1. **Application to Conference theme:**

At its essence, learning in community is about communication and psychological safety. Groupthink is about neither. This case helps the discussion about the causes and remedies for groupthink and other ailments that destroy community.

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| 1. **Unique Contribution to OBTC:**

We have never presented this work at a conference. However, one of the authors has used this case in both MBA and undergraduate classes successfully and is always surprised at the level of student engagement on this case compared to other cases.

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| 1. **References and/or Additional Materials:**
* Branch, J. “The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” The New York Times, December 21, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/#/?part=tunnel-creek>* Bazerman M. and D. Chugh, *Decisions without Blinders* ” Harvard Business Review, January, 2006
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