



Teaching Conference for
Management Educators

OBTC 2017 at Providence College
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Conference Proposal

Dialogue Between Theory and Application:
The Enduring Appeal of Carter Racing

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Based on the Space Shuttle Challenger launch decision, Carter Racing is a best-seller 30 years after its introduction at the OBTC in 1987. The lessons currently taught, however, little resemble the original intent. For unique reasons, including the visibility of the tragedy, Carter Racing's interpretation has drifted upon the changing currents of organizational behavior. It has served as a vehicle for identifying the questions that do not get asked and for understanding why these questions, once asked, seem insufficient to change the decisions that occurred the night and morning of January 27-28, 1986, decisions that resulted in tragedy.

In this session, which is proposed for 60 minutes, we will explore the changing currents of organizational behavior and the enduring appeal of the Carter Racing case exercise.

Originally presented at the OBTC in Boston in 1987, Carter Racing has had remarkable staying power, surprising its authors and drifting on the changing currents of the field. Originally conceived as a way to demonstrate the value of understanding organizational processes in decisions dominated by quantitative logics, Carter Racing has evolved as a point of departure for discussing risky shift in group decision making, information processing in behavioral decision making, the role of cognitive biases in organizational decision making, and has more recently served as a platform for examining why ethical questions are not considered in environments characterized by calculative mindsets.

The distribution of Carter Racing, based on licensed¹ uses, built quite slowly as it was adopted by individuals at institutions across the country (Figure 1). The case was first licensed to textbooks, and textbook adoptions are not reflected in the licensed use numbers. Usage picked up significantly in 1992, which is when we quit licensing the case for textbook usage, and eventually settled at an average range of 24,000 to 28,000 users per year starting in 2005. While cumulative use has continued to grow (Figure 2), the growth in use is bound to start declining as memories of the underlying tragedy start to fade. It is possible we are in this period of decline already and it is not yet apparent.

¹ The case has long had many unlicensed uses. We suspect the percentage of licensed uses have gone up over time, but we cannot be sure.

Figure 1. Registered Users

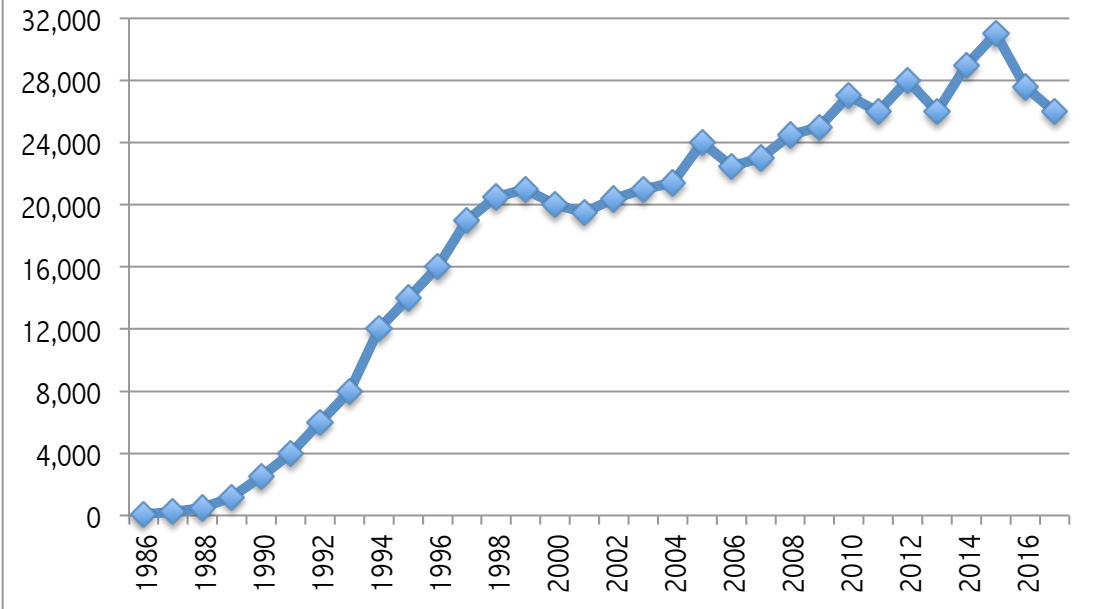
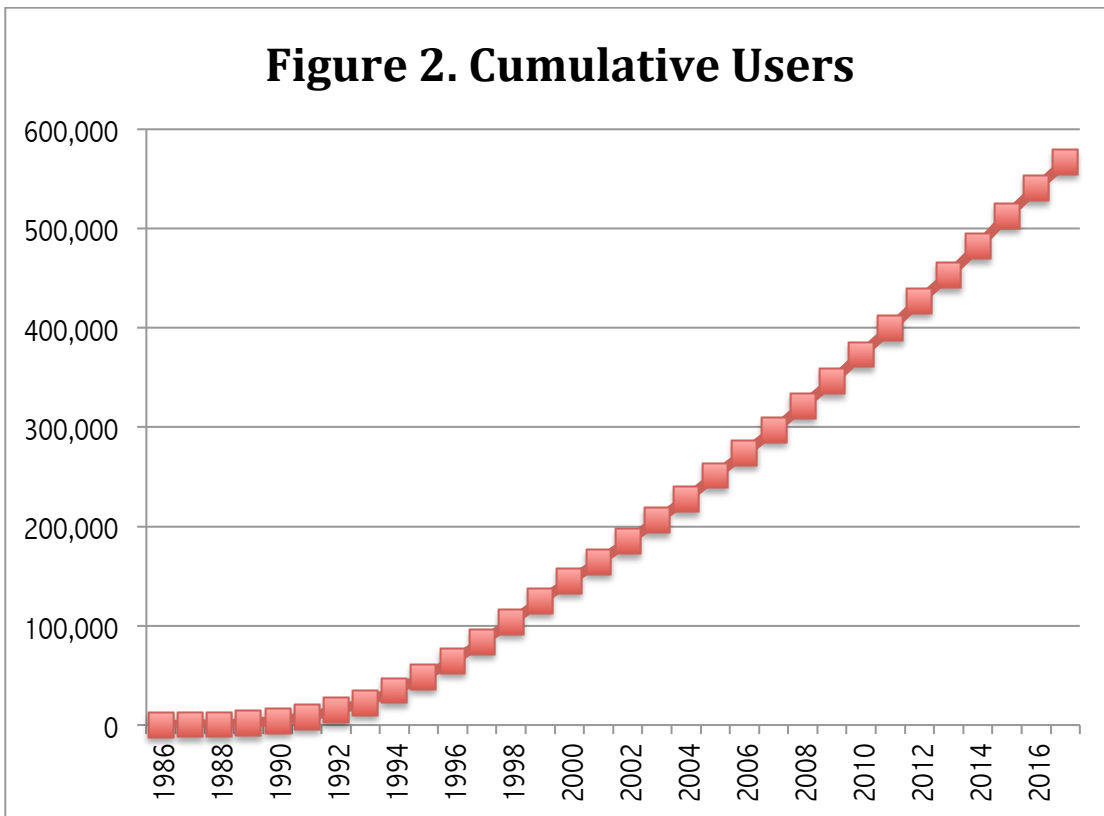


Figure 2. Cumulative Users



One question that is endlessly asked about Carter Racing is why does it work? Why do classes, even when confronted with the arguments that the case is based on the Space Shuttle Challenge launch,² invariably choose to race?

This question has intrigued us as well, and we have had many a coffee with colleagues who want to discuss this question, and we have given many approvals for research use where scholars are exploring this question with research.

After many years of considering this question, we have no answer. But we think the capacity of the case to provoke the unanswered question, and to continue to challenge faculty to understand the dynamics of the decision process, helps explain the case's enduring appeal. We also think the case serves as a platform for understanding how theory dialogs with teaching, a dialog that in itself is one of the currents that defines organizational behavior as a field.

Our plan for the proposed session is to engage this dialog and to discuss the currents that have converged on Carter Racing and propelled its use.

Session Plan

The session will parallel classroom use of Carter Racing as originally conceived: as a linear discussion of the case with timed introductions of key pieces of information. The case is set up for a decision that needs to take place in 60 minutes, and we will parallel this in the session. However, because our audience is likely to include many users and individuals who understand the background material, the focus of the discussion will be the “unasked question,” exploring both why it is unasked and what the impact is of asking the questions that have emerged as organizational behavior, as a body of knowledge, has evolved over the last 30 years.

Participants are invited to share their “unasked questions,” to challenge one another, and ultimately and collectively, to try to understand why the Carter Racing effect is so robust.

² In the most extreme case in classroom use, we had a student stand up in class with a copy of Diane Vaughan's book, *The Challenger Launch Decision*, and fail to persuade any fellow students against racing. If I have a student suggest the case is just like the Challenger Launch, I simply write this on the board and find the class ignores the information.

Timeline

10 minutes	Introduction of the case and discussion of the various parts using the lens of quantitative analysis and exploring information availability.
20 minutes	Exploration of the questions unasked, in particular looking at risk-seeking, participant self-censoring and group censoring, information process and decision biases as explanations for the group dynamics of the case.
10 minutes	The ethical platform and the unasked questions it raises. Why are they never asked, seen as irrelevant when asked, and why do they not influence the decision that is made?
15 minutes	Discussion and dialog about the theoretical possibility of exploring, through teaching, the questions that are not asked. Participants are invited to share their experiences and reflect on the discussion during the session.
5 minutes	Final comments by the facilitators, questions for the participants, and wrap up.

If the session achieves its goal of engaging participants, and classroom use has proven Carter Racing is an engaging exercise, then the conversation will continue beyond the session. We hope this provokes a continuing discussion of the dialog between teaching as application and the exploration of theory that is both informative and drives this dialog to look at the “unasked questions,” which we think are fruitful challenges to existing theory.

Navigating the Changing Currents

It is our observation, as the authors of Carter Racing and the longest standing users of 30 years, that the case/exercise has endured not because it has a fixed lesson to teach, but because it is a platform for asking questions that could only be discovered over time. The case has endured largely unchanged, albeit with a few updates to monetary values, a change to gender-neutral names, and a change of name as the field has changed because it is still a dilemma unsolved. The underlying tragedy is vivid and something that has not been forgotten, and this, too, contributes to the enduring interest in the case.

But we think there is something more to explore collectively at the OBTC, which is the bigger dialog that occurs when we teach and seek the unasked questions that might just give us insight into a tragedy that we do not want to replicate. And this is the power of the case: it encourages the participants to make a decision they do not

want to make, and in so doing confronts them with the questions they did not ask. At the same time it challenges us, as scholars, to think about the questions we do not know to ask.

Contribution to OBTC

It has been 30 years since Carter Racing was first introduced at the OBTC in Boston and 28 years since the analysis of the case was published in the *Journal of Management Education* (Brittain and Sitkin, 1989). The field has changed significantly and the body of knowledge we can bring to bear on the kinds of questions posed by Carter Racing has expanded enormously. We propose revisiting Carter Racing precisely because it is likely approaching the end of its useful life. And yet it still raises questions and “why does it work” seems unanswered. We look forward to engaging the Conference participants in thinking about this a bit because we think it will help us and the participants understand how our engagement as teachers informs our work as scholars.

References

Brittain, Jack, and Sim B. Sitkin, 1989. “Facts, Figures and Organizational Decisions: The Carter Racing Case and Quantitative Analysis in the Organizational Behavior Classroom,” *Journal of Management Education*, 14: 62-81.