

ARTICLE

Sink or swim: Healthcare's Orca moment

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<https://www.chartis.com/insights/sink-or-swim-healthcares-orca-moment>

“You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” You know the line. Chief Brody mutters it to Captain Quint after his first terrorizing glimpse of the massive shark they were hunting (and that was hunting them, too).

The toothy head of the great white bursting through blood and water near the stern of their little trawler is one of the great jolts in *Jaws*, the 1975 blockbuster celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

The movie – and the making of the suspense masterpiece itself – is a tale of grit, creativity and how individuals can make their own desperate luck with the limited tools and time at their hands.

Today’s leaders facing challenges with imperfect resources, competitive predators and uncertain seas, so to speak, might consider popping some corn and joining millions in a rewatch this Labor Day weekend. (Looking at you, healthcare execs.)

There are some lessons for us all in this fish tale.

Victory from jaws of defeat

You know the story. But here’s a refresh if your last viewing was before America’s bicentennial.

A monstrous shark is killing swimmers off the coast of fictional New Hampshire beach town Amity Island. To forefend a tourist panic, the city places a bounty on the beast. Brody, scraggly shark hunter Quint, and an oceanographer embark on a fishing boat to kill it.

Spoiler alert: They succeed.

But the victory is a near thing and is not accomplished without sacrifice and not until the crew has exhausted themselves, their courage, every innovative idea they have, and every piece of equipment at their disposal.

Indeed, the making of the movie itself has similar succeeding-against-all-odds vibes.

Steven Spielberg – then a relatively unknown, 27-year-old director – didn't get what he wanted to produce *Jaws*.

He didn't get the actors he originally wanted, the budget he wanted or the production timeline he wanted. He didn't (initially) like John Williams' musical theme for the soundtrack. Shooting in the Atlantic Ocean proved a nightmare. He didn't start with a finished script. Even the mechanical shark (named Bruce, after his attorney) rarely worked at all.

"I truly believed that *Jaws* would be the last movie I would ever be given to direct," said Spielberg.

"In most circumstances, summer in the Vineyard is a dream," referring to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts where *Jaws* was filmed. "But when you are over budget and over schedule and when I am over my head, that summer of 1974 was a bad dream before it ever became the dream of a lifetime."

Invention's mother

The success of the movie is hard to overstate. Its impact on cinema and culture is still reverberating. It's been a half-century since its debut and we're still streaming it and talking about it. A thousand movies have imitated it.

But *Jaws* was not successful, or a catalyst in the industry, *despite* the many limitations its production faced.

The film became what it was *because* of them.

The genius of Spielberg is that he worked within the production's many restraints to create a thrilling work of popular art. If the shark didn't work, he used its absence to build tension. If a difficult water sequence failed, the script was rewritten to accommodate the difficult water. Lines were rewritten, actors sobered up, cameras changed. The set was a masterclass of active innovation.

He built something radically new because the limited raw materials he was given demanded something radically new. Necessity was the mother of startling creativity.

"Spielberg's ability to adapt to and make the best of a seemingly endless series of challenges, roadblocks, and constraints? That's what made *Jaws* the film it became," writes Jeff Haden in Inc.

"Constraints can fuel creativity and innovation and build forward momentum by eliminating the temptation to sift through seemingly infinite possibilities."

Healthcare's Orca moment

No healthcare leader has every resource they want to respond to today's challenges. Nor will they.

In fact, it can seem the job of leading a healthcare organization today is one of managing diminishing fortunes in uncertain times. Not enough money, not enough time, not enough staff, not enough stability, not enough institutional stamina. None of these will be magically replenished, despite the desperate hope for a return to happier (and better funded) days.

The way forward is not back.

The future of care will be created from the embers of today's limitations, from its constraints.

Daring creativity, challenging innovations, the courage to sacrifice old models for new approaches and partnerships, the dogged determination to apply sweat-equity to forge a cohesive whole from its many fraying parts is the work of today's healthcare artists.

Lucky Lady with Gene Hackman, Burt Reynolds, and Liza Minelli also opened in 1975. It was one of the most expensive movies made that year. Expectations were enormous. Never heard of it? There you go.

Jaws did not create movies. It was not the first thriller. It was not well funded. But, despite all—or because of it—its young director and talented staff and actors created a new standard for what was possible in 130 minutes of film.

And the crew of *The Orca*?

They wanted a bigger boat, but they didn't get one.

And killed that damn shark anyway.

This article is part of Healthcare Remix—a series of leadership articles that connect history and the arts with today's healthcare challenges and opportunities. [Click here to view all.](#)



About the authors

Ken Graboys, CEO of Chartis, began his journey not in an office, but in rural Africa, working in communities facing famine and limited access to care. It was there he saw how the foundations of health—food, medicine, compassion—could shape the trajectory of entire communities. In 2001, he co-founded Chartis with the mission to improve the delivery of healthcare in the world. His career path—from fieldwork in Mauritania to healthcare transformation—illustrates a commitment to cultivating healthier communities through thoughtful, sustainable action.

David Jarrard, Chairman of Jarrard, grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee—a town shaped by science and innovation. His early career as a journalist covering human stories gave him firsthand insight into how storytelling can influence public perception and drive change, which naturally connects to healthcare, a field where clear communication can impact patient outcomes and organizational success. This foundation led him to build one of the nation’s leading healthcare communications firms.

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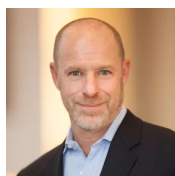
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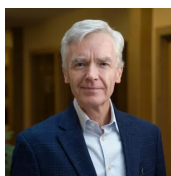
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