

# The Organisation Culture of Outward Bound New Zealand 1962–2012

by Andrew J. Martin

This paper highlights the key factors of organisational culture (artefacts, values & beliefs, and core assumptions that have led to Outward Bound New Zealand's sustained success over the past fifty years. Primary data for this case study was obtained through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with past and present School and Executive Directors.

A key finding is that OBNZ has stayed true to the original values of Kurt Hahn, which have been reviewed and formalised through the 'fundamentals' of greatness, compassion, responsibility and integrity. Important visible symbols of the OBNZ brand are the badge, the logo with 'to serve, to strive and not to yield', and the cutter. The core assumption is still focused on self-discovery and the OB motto 'there's more to you than you think'. The unique New Zealand course design at a beautiful Marlborough Sounds location typically involves three weeks of intense activity with a diverse group of participants. It combines physical outdoor adventure challenges, integrating the bush, the sea, the rivers, community service, solo plus activities involving the rocks, ropes and running. Important formal course rites and rituals have evolved, particularly around the beginning and closing of a course, for example signing in or the tree ceremony. The physical nature of the course is emphasised through morning physical training, a run, a swim, and a cold shower. The instructors, regarded as special passionate people, have been a key factor in the organisation's success and changing over 54,000 people's lives. Their technical skills, life experiences, and facilitation expertise enhances participants' personal and professional development. The 3–5 year staff contract ensures the organisation remains energised and refreshed. These findings provide insight into the experiential learning culture and learning leadership within the OBNZ organisation, which has been largely independent of political influence, but responsive to the current needs and expectations of society. There have been major challenges, particularly in the 1990s, which required significant organisation governance change and a diversification of courses. Safety has been a priority

throughout and communication technology innovations have assisted compliance, which is formalised and audited. As a result of both internal and external tragedies, it is no longer appropriate or acceptable to take risks where there is a meaningful and real chance of someone dying. It is anticipated that these findings will be transferable to other contexts and assist in the organisational development of effective leadership and culture.

## Organisational Culture

Organisational culture has been defined as, "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration... [This] worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2010, p. 18). In his book *Organisational culture and leadership* Schein asserts that artefacts located at the surface of a culture, which

are visible or tangible but sometimes not decipherable, are realisations of underlying values that in turn are manifestations of deeper assumptions.

## Outward Bound

Given OBNZ's recent celebration of fifty years, there would appear to be important synergies with this research/model and its organisation culture and on-going success. OBNZ is a non-profit educational charitable trust that operates from the Cobham Outward Bound School (COBS) at Anakiwa in the Marlborough Sounds. Over 54,000 New Zealanders have taken part in courses over the past fifty years (OBNZ, 2011). The courses are part of its organisational culture, which has been developed, nurtured and sustained since its inception in 1962. Grady (1987) described the OBNZ courses as "a series of programmed physical and social problem solving tasks, held in a high impact environment" (p. 9). What is remarkable about OBNZ is that over fifty years the Standard/Classic (three-week) Course has remained the same/similar throughout that time despite major macro environmental changes. This case study evaluates the OBNZ organisational culture from 1962 to 2012, and the factors that have been important for its success.

OB programmes have been running for over seventy years and currently exist in all continents and over thirty countries and OB 'schools' around the world (OBI, 2013). Outward Bound International (OBI), an

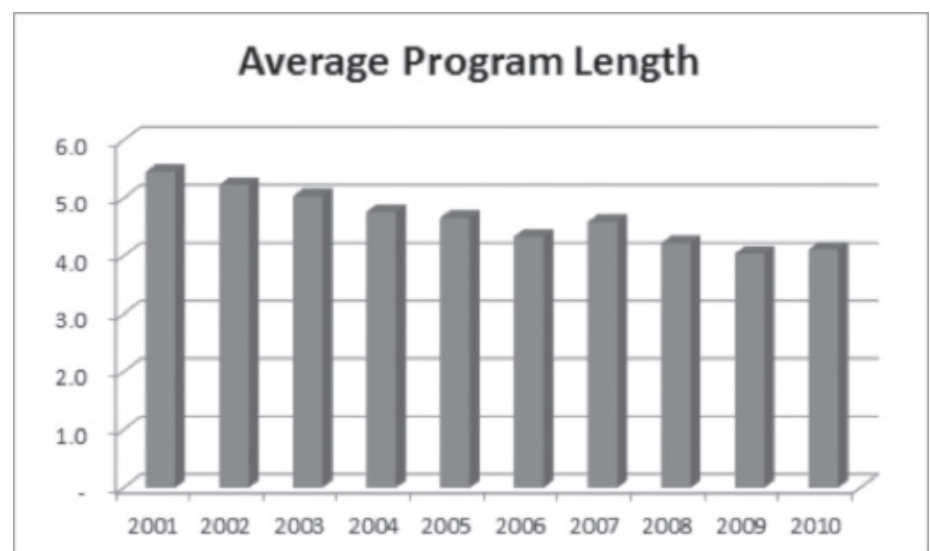


Figure 1

incorporated non-profit organisation, was set up in 1997 to oversee the OB schools internationally. OBNZ became part of OBI, but is managed independently. At that time OBI reported that many OB schools were experiencing falling rolls and financial problems (OBI, 1997; Pereira, 1997), for example at OBNZ (1995). The trend was towards shorter courses with the original three or four week course in decline (OBI, 1997). Internationally the diversification towards shorter OB courses and away from the traditional three-week course has continued over the past decade (see Figure 1). This diversification in courses has been mirrored at OBNZ. However, their core business remains the 3-week course and internationally has maintained the longest average course length (Figure 2).

## Method

This case study of OBNZ allows for the integration and contrasting of different perspectives to provide a detailed understanding of a context. Primary data was obtained through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews (by telephone/in person) with past and present OBNZ School

Directors (n=10) and Executive Directors (4). Some of the School Directors had also previously been instructors, senior management (Deputy Warden/Training Manager) and/or course participants. One further interview was undertaken with an instructor from the first course era, as sadly the original School and Executive Directors are now deceased. This method has been chosen because it is used in qualitative research to investigate different phenomena within their real contexts (Yin, 2009). It is noted that a broader sample of staff could have been undertaken, in particular instructors. However, as Schein notes in the title of his book (2010), there is a close connection between leadership and culture. So in a study of cultural issues it is appropriate to focus on the organisation leaders and their perceptions in particular.

The use of qualitative data analysis in this case study aimed to communicate understanding from the different interviews (Stake, 2008). The semi-structured interview allowed for the expansion and clarification of responses in order to understand respondents' opinions and beliefs regarding the organisational culture and leadership. The information has been

analysed according to Huberman's (1994) well-established principles of qualitative data analysis. These are data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification. The credibility and dependability of the research was enhanced by triangulating the information (Stake, 2008) involving relevant documentation (OBNZ annual reports), the data collected from the interviews, and the researcher with his previous extensive experience of OB. Where applicable, reporting of the descriptive verbatim responses occurred to convey the holistic and subjective understanding and meaning of the phenomena under study (Merriam, 1998).

## Rites & Rituals Arrival (Opening)

The arrival at Anakiwa in the Marlborough Sounds provides an important metaphor for the name 'Outward Bound'.

The opening ceremonies are times of coming together and acknowledging heritage, legacy, achievement and celebration. School Director (1983–87), Bob McKerrow introduced a Maori welcome and farewell, as Anakiwa is on Maori land. These

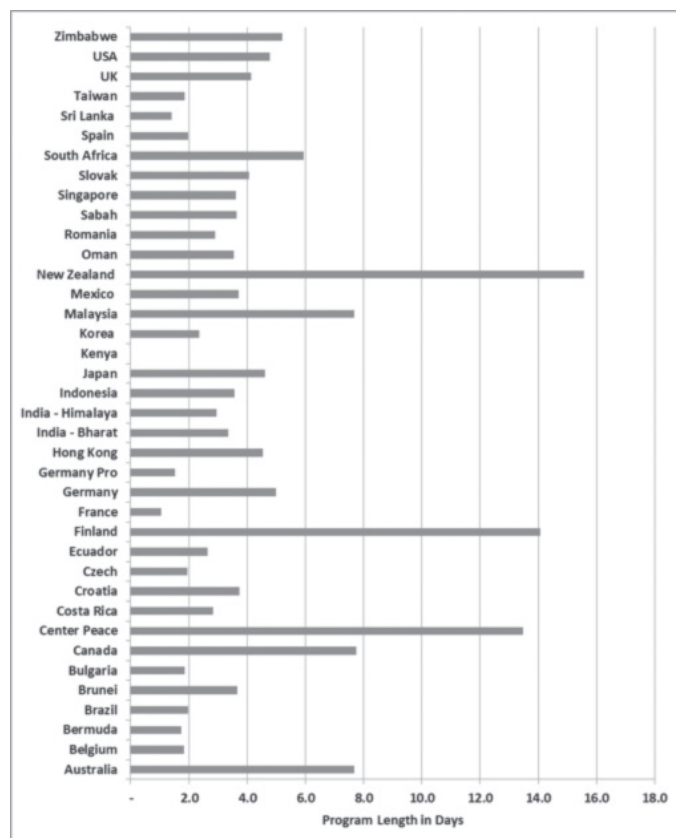


Figure 2

greetings provide an important sense of Turangawaewae [empowerment and connection, a foundation, a home]. A powhiri [formal ceremony] and mihi [speech] were also added in the mid-1990s by School Director (1995–2000), Gaike Knottenbelt to welcome people in, in a significant way. These aspects have now been formalised.

The formal welcome on to the front lawn invites the students to sign in against some training conditions. The ritual of signing in sets the scene, expectations and provides protocols. On the first night everyone stands up and introduces themselves to the whole team starting with the Director, the instructors and then every student.

### Departure (Closing)

The departure was also taken seriously and involves a tree planting ceremony. The tree planting ceremony was started in the mid-80s by School Director (1987–91; Deputy School Director 1983–87), Jon D’Almeida. It symbolises putting roots down and belonging.

### Mornings

The beginning of each day at Anakiwa has some specific rites and rituals that provide a metaphor of a refreshing start and renewal. Physical training (PT), the run, the swim and cold shower are done 365 days of the year.

## Symbols

### The Badge

Students finishing a course at OBNZ are extraordinarily proud of their achievements, which are represented by the badge.

### The Logo

‘To serve, to strive and not to yield’ has been entwined with the logo.

### The Cutter

The Cutter [boat] has been an important OB symbol since its beginning in 1941.

## Values & Beliefs

A key belief has always been the importance of learning through experience. OBNZ has remained true to its fundamental values throughout its fifty years. The instructors also reflect the values of OBNZ.

The values and philosophy of Kurt Hahn have been ever present at OBNZ.

The review of the fundamentals was initiated by School Director (2003-09), Steve Hall. Many are relatively similar to those of Kurt Hahn, but the value of ‘greatness’ is uniquely OBNZ.

### Greatness

Greatness is to be strived for, to achieve full potential, to be your best self.

## Compassion

A key value is to show care and concern and act with a spirit of respect and generosity.

## Responsibility

Responsibility, which ties into professionalism, is about response-ability, to choose your responses and be accountable for decisions, action and consequences.

## Integrity

To be true to the guiding values and act with honesty is evidenced in the badge ceremony for students at the end of the course, and is also important for staff to role model and ‘walk the talk’.

## Core Assumptions

The core assumption of self-discovery has remained consistent throughout the 50 years of OBNZ reinforced by the motto of ‘there’s more to you than you think’.

## Self-Discovery

The course provides a rite of passage, testing perceived limits. It provides a microcosm of part of a student’s life’s journey.

## There’s More to You than You Think

There is an emphasis on challenging yourself to doing your best, being your best self.

## Macro-Environment Factors

### Political

OBNZ largely operated independently from political influence for the first thirty years, despite being opened by the Governor General that bears his name, the Cobham Outward Bound School. However, over the past twenty years there has been an increasing cost of regulatory and safety compliance as a result of the Health & Safety Act (OSH) and Resource Management Act

### Socio-Cultural

The original school in the UK responded to the country’s need to assist the survival of young men in war time. OBNZ has continued to respond to society’s need, for example through women’s and co-ed courses.

The philosophy has been targeted on attracting all New Zealanders. Initially, this was not achieved with the more middle



class professional young men being sent by corporate organisations or service groups. More recently a range of diverse courses has also targeted different societal target groups, for example, 21-day 'Mind Body Soul' for school leaders; 8-day 'Leaps and Bounds' for parents and child; courses for the unemployed, older adults' courses, corporate courses, sport organisation courses, courses for the mentally or physically disabled. The challenge today is to attract an increasingly multi-cultural urban based demographic.

### Economic

OBNZ enjoyed a very successful period for the first thirty years with full courses and often waiting lists. However declining roles, decreasing funding, and two deaths in the early 90s resulted in reserves being eroded to the point whereby in 1997 it was virtually bankrupt. This was a defining time for OBNZ and a period of significant governance change, and diversification of courses to attract greater funding streams. This strategy has been successful with significant financial reserves and waiting lists developing.

### Technology

The main theme for technology change has been one of communication developments that have assisted safety, from phones and faxes, to computers and

networking, to satellite and cell phones, Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and Emergency Locator Beacons (ELBs).

### Micro-Environment Factors Safety

A key theme that has been consistent through the fifty years of OBNZ has been the emphasis and focus on safety. Throughout this period there have been systems in place which have reflected society's views on safety of the time. During the early courses, with the demands of nature, adventure and the physical activities, it was accepted that injuries were part of the course. There were three deaths in the first thirty years. However, following two deaths in the early 1990s there were thorough internal and external audits, and a complete review and rewrite of the Standard Operation Procedures (SOP) handbook, which had become unwieldy and outdated.

Following the Mangatepopo tragedy in 2008 at the Sir Edmund Hilary Outdoor Pursuits Centre (Brookes, 2011) and the resulting New Zealand Government's Adventure Activity Review in 2009, social expectation has changed. It is no longer appropriate or acceptable to take risks where there is a meaningful and real chance of someone dying. It was an important wake up call for the industry

and heightened the sense of responsibility for staff at Anakiwa

### Leadership

The instructors have been a key factor in the organisations success. They are regarded as 'special passionate people', whose exceptional empathy has facilitated and enhanced the personal and professional development of course participants, as well as their own life learning and experiences. Given the demands and intensity of the roles the three to five year period of the limited term contracts for both School Directors and instructing staff ensures that they do not stay too long, enabling them and the organisation to remain energised and refreshed.

### Course Factors

#### Design Principles

An important factor has been the overall course structure in New Zealand, which involves three weeks of intense physical activity in the outdoors with a diverse group of participants in a safe and supportive environment. It combines learning through adventurous and challenging experiences, integrating the bush, sea, rivers, community service, solo and activities involving rocks, ropes and running. Course objectives focus on self and social development guided by fundamental values and



appreciation of the natural environment and service to the community.

### Location

The school's beautiful location at Anakiwa in the Marlborough Sounds, arguably a Taonga [national treasure], provides an ideal context for the outdoor physical adventure activities.

### Conclusions

Important rites and rituals have evolved particularly around the beginning and closing of a course, for example signing in or the end tree ceremony. The physical nature of the course is highlighted by the morning activities of PT, the run, the swim, and cold shower. There are specific symbols, the badge, the logo with 'to serve, to strive and not to yield', and the cutter that are important recognisable images of the brand. OBNZ has stayed true to the values of Kurt Hahn. More recently these values have been reviewed and formalised through the 'fundamentals' of greatness, compassion, responsibility and integrity.

The core assumption of OBNZ is still focused on self-discovery and Kurt Hahn's motto of 'There's more to you than you think'. The significant important impacts of the 'inward sounds of Outward Bound' (Martin & Legg, 2002) are also emphasised by former School Director, Bob McKerrow (quoted in Grady, 1987). Martin Tolich's (2012) OBNZ course auto-ethnography expresses the thoughts of many who depart the course.



The course design and the location, developed over fifty years, have built an expectation for New Zealanders that OBNZ changes lives.

Overall, OBNZ's success has been a combination of having such strong rites and rituals, core values and beliefs, and also at the same time being flexible, adaptable and responsive to changes in the macro environment.

### Implications

The design of this research study of organizational culture and leadership has been influenced by the work of Edgar Schein. The use of in-depth individual semi-structured interviews using experts has been enlightening, providing a rich source of data, and a credible method of qualitative research. The findings of this current research have endorsed Schein's theory of organizational culture involving the importance of artefacts and creations, rites and rituals, espoused values, and embedded core assumptions. Despite major macro environmental changes over the fifty years, OBNZ has remained true to its belief in the original values, core assumptions and the Standard/Classic (three-week) Course. The range of activities utilised in the unique outdoor environment of the Marlborough Sounds has required extensive on-going review of safety systems, which have reflected society's views on safety of the time.

The strong leadership of OBNZ is reflected in the employment of passionate and increasingly qualified staff on short term contracts, which has enabled the organisation to remain energised and refreshed. However, any changes particularly to the symbols, rites and rituals associated with the OBNZ courses or brand have been robustly argued and often strongly resisted. It is hoped that these findings can be transferred to other Outward Bound schools and business organisations internationally who are trying to cope with the increasingly changing demands of the modern world.

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### Biography

Associate Professor Andy Martin was awarded a Massey University Academic Fellowship in Applied Learning in 2012. He participated in an 8-day Outward Bound New Zealand (OBNZ) course in 1996 and has carried out a number of studies internationally on Outward Bound (OB), particularly in the Czech Republic focusing on their holistic outdoor experiential education course design methods involving dramaturgy.

