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# THE INFLUENCE OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON SAFETY PRACTICES IN THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report explores the association between Kiwi national culture and thinking and behaviour associated with health and safety programmes. It establishes that people from different nations perceive personal risk and safety and their relationship to it differently in distinct, significant and predictable ways.

The report suggests that there is not a health and safety mindset as such but rather that the effect is indirect through attitudes to rules, risk taking, care for others versus self and the like. Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person engages in an activity that is not consistent with their national culture and personal values and this is likely to be the mechanism through which national culture affects safety related behaviour.

National culture is path dependent and New Zealand's unusual historical pathway has resulted in a unique national culture. Kiwis are individualist but "mateship" modifies its expression. Kiwis are better described as self-reliant with high initiative. There is little difference between male and female roles and similarly only modest power differentials are tolerated. Kiwis tolerate uncertainty making achieving awareness of personal risk challenging. Further they err towards mastery of their environment ensuring a high degree of confidence in their ability to control their situation. Collectively these result in a culture where concern for the well being of others is high but so is risk taking. DIY is a national trait but it is



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suggested that the associated improvising, she'll be right, give it a go daring is an important factor to consider.

The report concludes that messaging focused on the identification and prevention of accidents to others rather than self may be more effective. A series of associated factors that may impact safety behaviour are explored including time poverty and conflicting messages. A series of recommendations are made regarding potential messaging, communication channels that align with the Kiwi cultural traits, especially "mateship", uncertainty tolerance and the need to ensure participation/engagement and choice while avoiding hyperbole and slogans.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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This report is based on the premise that health and safety programmes based on a carrot and stick approach have inherent limitation. The health and safety "police" cannot be everywhere all of the time. We know that when strategy and culture clash, culture wins every time. Like business strategy, health and safety programmes need to be aligned with both business culture and national culture. People from different cultures perceive risk and safety and their relationship to it differently in distinct, significant and predictable ways.

This report is based on work originally conducted by *Forté Management* for the New Zealand Accident Compensation Corporation.

This report is divided into five sections:

1. Introduction
2. The national culture and safety research;
3. National culture and its influence on thinking and behaviour;
4. How culture impacts safety; and
5. Conclusions and suggestions.

This report is evidence based drawing on published research findings and *Forté Management's* own NZ research on the impacts of national culture on cognition and behaviour.

## 2. THE NATIONAL CULTURE & SAFETY RESEARCH

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While organisational culture varies quite dramatically from firm to firm the unifying factor across any nation is national culture. There is wide agreement in the published research that different nationalities have different attitudes toward risk taking, adherence to rules and procedures, and the importance of safety.

## 3. NATIONAL CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THINKING & BEHAVIOUR

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National culture is the shared set of learned mental models that groups of people use to interpret what they experience from the world around them and to determine their cognitive and behavioural responses. It can be thought of as the “Software of the Mind” (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005) or “shared basic assumptions” (Schien 1992). Shared values give rise to patterns of behaviour and our goal is to identify some of those patterns from the literature and our research on workplace behaviour and relate those to safety behaviour. National culture is commonly measured, ranked and compared by *dimensions*. Dimensions vary across nations in statistically significant and practically important manners. New Zealand culture is quite unusual!

Prior to discussing national culture the following caveat from Hofstede (2001) is essential: *“Changing collective values of adult people in an intended direction is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Values do change, but not according to someone’s master plan. Collective practices, however, depend on organisation characteristics like structures and systems, and can be influenced in more or less predictable ways by changing these.”*

Adopting the view of culture as collective practises, because these practises can be influenced, is a more useful and practical way to bring about culture change or at least modify the manner in which resident mental models express themselves. By changing the practises, individuals will, to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance (the difference between how people expect to feel and how they actually feel), realign their values, hence a short term intervention to change

practices will have a long term impact on values and assumptions ie Schien's "shared basic assumptions" will shift.

Organisational culture is moderated by national culture (eg Seymen & Bolat) and national culture tends to have primacy over organisational culture. Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1998) identify that national culture is more influential than age, race, gender, religion, education or occupation, while Zaltman (2003) notes that "*The culture a person grows up in strongly influences his or her brain wirings, or neural pathways, in the early years of life*". In other words, the influence of national culture is not trivial.

"Mindfulness" [or safety "awareness"] is as much about what people do with what they notice as it is about the noticing itself eg Weick, Sutcliff & Obstfeld (1999) and therefore because national culture works by filtering the messages received and how they are interpreted/responded to, the "choice" of behaviour in any particular situation is moderated by our national culture.

New Zealand's European colonisation was particularly unusual in that at a key time in the development of Kiwi culture immigrants were drawn from a particularly narrow and unstratified segment of British society (eg Palmer 2007; Phillips 1987). National culture is path dependent and New Zealand's path has been unique. The thinking and behaviour that the immigrants brought with them sowed the seeds of today's thinking and behaviour. It has resulted in a number of "anomalies" that provide some useful insights to safety thinking and behaviour. Amongst those anomalies is the peculiarly ANZAC notion of "mateship". Immigration resulted in the arrival of a large number of solitary, uneducated (In 1850 literacy was higher amongst the Māori population than the immigrants) resourceful, independent and self reliant individualist (usually) males who out of necessity found it advantageous to "look out" and care for each other or cover each others backs (Phillips 1987) – hence the evolution of the concept of "mateship". This notion of looking out for others as opposed to selfish individualism, provides a powerful pointer for safety message design.

National culture is maintained and passed from generation to generation through family and institutions such as schools, clubs, churches etc. National culture is stable over long periods of time and the current literature indicates that there is no evidence that globalisation of the media etc is causing any convergence of cultural values. If anything the rise of nationalism, Islam etc is resulting in divergence. Immigration to New Zealand will be changing our national

culture however that shift is unlikely to be as dramatic as some commentators (and politicians) would have us believe. That said, national culture is constantly evolving.

As with any statistical mean we must constantly recall that we are looking at the average of a distribution so it is important to think of the discussion as relating to “the group” rather than to individuals, that is, typical values and behaviour.

There have been four major studies of national culture each including New Zealand (Hofstede 2001; Javidan & House 2001; Schwartz 1999; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998). Each study used a different typology of “dimensions”, different samples and were conducted over a forty year period. Except in one instance (masculinity/femininity), the studies came to remarkably similar findings and conclusions about the dominant New Zealand culture that we will refer to as “Kiwi” culture. Forté Management’s work is the most comprehensive effort to draw together all of the research on national culture.

National culture can be thought of in three parts – how people relate to each other, how they relate to their environment, and how they relate to time. While for convenience we separate national culture into dimensions according to the various typologies, we must always recognise that the whole is more (much more) than the sum of its parts and in New Zealand’s case in particular be aware of the influence of our historical pathway to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE

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**Individualism vs collectivism:** Individualism is where people see themselves as individuals first and members of a group second. It implies a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves. Kiwis are individualist and quite strongly inner directed but the overlay of “mateship” modifies this individualism in a curious manner and it is probably best thought of as “self reliance”. That self reliance in turn manifests as a reluctance to accept help although being quick to offer it. It is accompanied by a high level of suspicion about officials and specialists. Our unqualified endorsement of generalists and DIYers is no more evident than in the Kiwi modified saying “*They’re a jack of all trades*”. The original expression of course went on to say “*...but master of none*” – meaning they weren’t any good at anything.

Typically individualist cultures are less risk averse than collectivist cultures and may be linked with over-confidence and non-conformance. The individualism should make Kiwis more open to argument and direct communication, while being dismissive of hyperbole and slogans (important). However a profound feedback reluctance attributable to very low assertiveness and the tall poppy syndrome makes it very difficult to give or receive direct answers in New Zealand – something that is directly contrary to Kiwis own notion of being straight shooting no B/S people.

**Power Distance Index:** The degree to which inequality is tolerated within a society. It is the opposite of egalitarianism. New Zealand has a moderately low PDI (relatively high egalitarianism) – although not as high as we typically assume. Low PDI implies the need for a high level of participation including in communication so in contrast to a high PDI society where a command and control approach to communication is effective, in low PDI New Zealand, any such directive communication is likely to be a barrier to message receipt and internalisation.

**Affective autonomy:** Kiwis rank highly for affective autonomy – the individual pursuit of adventure and discovery. In simple terms Kiwis are excited and motivated by doing new things and doing it solo or with a small number of mates as opposed to in groups. Rugby is a notable and curious exception to this finding.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

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**Uncertainty avoidance:** Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which people experience discomfort in situations of uncertainty. It is more easily thought of from the opposite perspective – as the extent to which uncertainty is tolerated without discomfort. Kiwis have relatively low uncertainty avoidance and therefore tolerate quite a high level of uncertainty. This is an important consideration in understanding and designing messaging as it seems probable that Kiwis experience little discomfort from potential risk which is largely externalised.

Although low Uncertainty Avoidance is not identical to high risk taking, and people from high UA cultures may engage in risky behaviour to reduce their uncertainty, there is a loose relationship between the two and so Kiwis can be seen as risk takers in most situations (except when money is involved!) In low UA societies like New Zealand it is important to avoid the appearance of imposing rules and over protection (Nanny State) and instead maximise participation and available choices.

**Mastery vs Harmony:** Based on Schwartz's work Kiwis tend toward "mastery" and daring rather than "harmony". This is highly consistent with what we observe. Daring (probably combining with the low UA) manifests as a "give it a go" and deal with the consequences later attitude. Mastery implies certain domination over the environment (natural and otherwise). This is most obvious when contrasted with Māori's relationship to the natural environment – a philosophy of working with rather than conquering nature.

Kiwis have a very high inner-directedness, ie a belief that we are in control of our environment and that leads to a very strong "it won't happen to me" and/or "I'll handle it" self belief.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH TIME

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**Long vs short term orientation:** This is the relative importance accorded to the future versus the present. Kiwis have a strong present orientation/short time horizon. Although the workplace safety literature reviewed reports no correlation with this dimension our own interpretation is that a present orientation will exacerbate the risk taking, give-it-a-go daring thus limiting the consideration of long term consequences of safety behaviour. In long term cultures people value the future more than the present and the opposite could therefore be concluded. This again means that future consequences are trumped by the current short term activity, especially if it is a new or DIY adventure.

DO-IT-YOURSELF:

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We believe that the cognition and behaviour associated with DIY is so important that we have dedicated a considerable amount of attention to it.

To avoid DIY becoming a distracting red herring, it is important to consider it from two perspectives. First is in the context that is routinely considered

and reported in the statistics – home maintenance, making things in the back shed etc where injuries occur from the conventional application of ladders, saws, mowers etc.

DIY needs to also be considered as a metaphor for a particular Kiwi mindset characterised by resourcefulness, improvisation, make do, she’ll be right, and a certain give-it-a-go “to-hell-with-the-consequences” daring.

Our legendary DIY/#8 gauge wire is a resourcefulness, ability and willingness to utilise things for purposes that they were not designed for and to accept (entirely unwittingly) the compromises that are involved in doing so. Accepting the compromise of associated risk may be included. We have shown two of many examples that we are aware of. The bedroom ladder “improv” resulted in a serious injury fall!

This view of DIY may be of more significance than engaging in DIY as previously defined since this mindset has broad implications and we suspect, the products of it will not appear overtly in the official statistics. We think it is a reasonable assumption that if a person has used a piece of bedroom furniture as a ladder they are more likely to report for instance that they “Fell while



making bunk bed” rather than “Fell while climbing up the bedroom drawers” etc. We should be looking as to how that impacts safety behaviour and accidents, and the reporting of them – especially the improvisation combined with a certain confidence in our own ruggedness, resilience and ability to control our environment.

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#### 4. HOW CULTURE IMPACTS SAFETY

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With regard to workplace performance we have suggested that the mechanism by which national culture influences performance is largely related to motivation and satisfaction. People are more motivated and satisfied by activities where the thinking and behaviour aligns with their national culture – or more strictly with the mental models arising from their national culture. Alternatively they experience less cognitive dissonance when their current thinking and behaviour aligns with their national culture. In translating this idea to safety thinking and behaviour we need to be very aware that the impact is frequently not direct and certainly not obvious, ie apparent attitudes to safety may tell only part of the story.

We are not promoting the idea of safety per se being a mindset. People do not hold a low safety mindset – it is other contributing factors that affect their safety behaviour. For example, for pilots, national culture impacts safety performance in attitudes to order-command automation and rules & regulations (Helmreich & Merrit 1998). Notably - Korean Airlines (KAL) horrific safety record between 1977 and 1999 when they lost twelve aircraft was attributed to the high Power Distance Index, that is, the aircraft crashed because of an attribute of Korean culture. Perhaps even more notable is that once recognised strategies were introduced to compensate

for the cultural traits KAL received an international safety award after just four years. Our argument is that the engagement in certain practices, or the failure to engage in others, may contribute to accidents. Our willingness to improvise and make do have a high probability of contributing to accidents. It is vital therefore to focus on ensuring that the workplace safety culture trumps the she'll be right, give-it-a-go daring Kiwi culture. That is no small undertaking since national culture tends to be more powerful than workplace culture.

People's perceptions of accidents and risk are distorted by media reporting. The statistics indicate for example that there is no issue with people seeing the home as a place in which accidents occur, but that they believe they are of a less serious nature than motor vehicle accidents (MVAs). This almost certainly reflects the very public and regular reporting of MVA accidents and statistics in the media along with the very obvious road safety campaigns. So the issue is not one of achieving awareness. The issue is rather one of getting people to internalise that risk, that is, accept that the risk applies to them. Unfortunately, it is more likely that as a result of a universal psychological phenomenon called "attribution error". In this we excuse ourselves when we make a mistake, blaming it on being stressed or tired etc. However when other people make the same mistake we blame it on them being careless or stupid etc. We think this is an important consideration for accident prevention.

We conclude that Kiwis are very quick to offer help but are reluctant or even find it demeaning to accept help (runs contrary to the intense self reliance). That leads us to the conclusion that messaging may be more effective when it is directed at managing the safe work environment of colleagues rather than self.

It is worth noting that people from low socioeconomic groups are likely to have more fatalistic external loci of control (that is, rely more upon instructions from superiors, that those superiors will ensure their safety and if something goes wrong it was unavoidable) and so if the employees are disproportionately lower socio economic the above "taking care of friends and mates" is still valid but would need to be modified to be more directive.

## BARRIERS AND MOTIVATORS FOR CHANGE

Research suggests that there are two key motivators for accident behaviour change. One is to avoid the consequences of an accident having had previous personal experience. The second is feeling responsible for vulnerable other people. This provides a particularly important pointer that is consistent with our understanding of Kiwi culture – the sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, especially those more vulnerable than ourselves. That is almost a perfect definition of “mateship” and is, we suggest, something that should be factored into safety programme design.

Barriers to change can be grouped into a number of areas:

Individual	Environmental	Societal / cultural
Not aware of personal risk False sense of security Belief that individuals are responsible for own behaviour Apathy Temporal discounting = it is not worth the effort now to avoid something in the future Literacy and/or preference for images over words	Aesthetics of safety options, ie resistance to safety gear and apparel Perceived or real cost of safety gear	Resistance to “Nanny State” interventions Self-reliant culture (DIY, fix-it myself, she’ll be right) “Make-doism” of NZ culture (failure to plan etc) Cluttered environment for receiving safety messages Fatalism - General perception that accidents just happen. <i>“It’s just the nature of our industry”</i>

The inherent limitations of safety systems may matter less in the presence of a robust culture of safety. Given that a) there is an existing awareness of risks and b) a belief that the risk will not manifest for the individual, it is probable that raising awareness of safety issues relative to particular events eg using a ladder has a low chance of success. Creating an umbrella “culture of safety” in the workplace has a much higher chance of success, ie safe practices are “how we do things around here!”

## TIME POVERTY:

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A feature of modern workplaces is time pressures. In our work at Forté Management one of the commonly encountered issues, whether it is team development, communications, stress or any of a range of other issues, is insufficient time. Kiwis are amongst the most time poor people in the industrialised world working longer than anyone apart from the Japanese (Messenger 2004). Kiwis currently work almost 50% longer than the French. That the societal norm is for women, whether working outside the home or not, to continue



to be “home makers” and “home managers” means that women are typically even more time impoverished. Matched with the Kiwi propensity to improvise - DIY in the form of using devices that are not designed for purpose or are inadequate for purpose seems to be a particularly fertile topic for investigation. The image above shows a DIY device that we encountered in a home kitchen. The egg beater was propped up on a bottle and left to work. As the cream in the bowl thickened it caused the egg beater to fall off the bench pulling the electric plug from the socket. The three pin plug hit the person involved squarely between the eyes leaving the impression of the plug in their forehead. If this had not been such a near miss of serious proportions it would have been comical. The situation was put down to time pressure. While this incident occurred in the home it, and the earlier examples are typical of so-called “Kiwi ingenuity”.

We should be aware that time poverty will invoke quite different responses in different cultures. For instance we often reflect upon a story from a friend whose sister, married to a wealthy lawyer, lives in Madrid. While visiting, our friend was taken for a drive in the country. Returning in a “dirty” black Mercedes, our friend prepared to wash the car as a Kiwi token of thanks – only to be told that he was doing the hired help out of a job. So not are we time poor

but our economic poverty and willingness to DIY sees us performing tasks that in other cultures would be performed by “specialists” (albeit in this instance a specialist “hired help”).

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## CONFLICTING MESSAGES

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Conflicting messages, and especially conflicting behaviour of managers is a major barrier to development of a “safety culture”. We often cite as an example Ministry of Health promotion of people avoiding using hand rails because they are contaminated with “germs” versus accident prevention messages insisting that people use hand rails when descending stairs.

We would expect the impact of conflicting messages to have a similar affect to negative versus positive stories where negative stories (about a business for example) carry something in the order of six times the weight of positive stories.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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Both the research and Forté Management’s conclusions based upon our experience with national culture and workplace performance support the importance of factoring both organisational and Kiwi culture into health and safety design, messaging and channels. **We know that when culture and strategy clash, culture wins every time. Organisations where the culture does not support health and safety initiatives will be in for a lot of “heavy lifting” and disappointing outcomes.**

According to Reason (in *Australian Safety News* 2000), a culture of safety is a function of being informed and therefore messaging aimed at informing people about actions they can take to avoid accidents, and especially to avoid accidents to friends and mates may be a useful complement to the traditional personal accident prevention strategies. Any messaging must aim to achieve internalisation of safety identification and prevention.

The following is a smorgasbord of ideas designed to provide discussion points for further consideration and development:

**Mateship culture.** Mateship means that messages designed to “look out” for others, especially friends and workmates is likely to carry appeal.

**Comfortable with uncertainty.** Kiwis relatively high acceptance of uncertainty, “give-it-a go” daring and sense of mastery (“I’ll be able to deal with it” and/or “it’ll happen to someone else”) attitudes combined with a high level of uncertainty tolerance mean that creating awareness of personal risk is unlikely to create the discomfort desired. However creating awareness of risk to others may prove more effective.

**Low power distance.** Kiwis relatively low Power Distance Index means that directive messaging will be ineffective. Instead self-realisation and choice is important – that is the camel must be enticed to walk to the water and invited to drink – not pulled by its tether etc!

**Self reliance and initiative.** Kiwis have a high level of self-reliance and initiative. Messaging that endorses these traits is likely to be more appealing than any that implies personal risk. Hyperbole and slogans need to be avoided.

**Participation and choice.** Participation and choice is important to create a fit with Kiwi culture. Consider the development of a “safety ideas competition” in which members of staff are incentivised to identify workplace safety risk factors **and** offer their own solutions. The solutions could then be publicised, carrying a great deal more credibility because they are “not official” pronouncements. Furthermore, in our experience, the people at the coal face have a different view to managers further up the chain and those views are often powerful and insightful.

**Review message conflicts.** Conflicting messages and behaviours, especially those of managers, may have a particularly deleterious impact on message reception and effectiveness. Identifying conflicting messaging and behaviour across the workplace is important.

**Messaging design tips.** The way messages need to be conveyed needs to be carefully considered. Written safety notices are rarely effective. We have one client who has erected photos of eye injuries in the workshop and found that much more effective than using “words”.

The following apply to messaging for Kiwis:

- Participative and flexible approaches are likely to be more effective than directive top down approaches;
- Encouraging initiative and responsibility for others is likely to be helpful;
- Emphasising mutual responsibilities for safety should be fruitful.

**DIY a risk factor.** DIY in the form of improvisation, make-do, give-it-a-go and “she’ll be right” is almost certain to be a concealed contributor to workplace accidents. “Professionalising” health and safety practises as part of doing a good job (most people working in positive cultures want to do a good job) rather than a bolt on extra should pay dividends.

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