

STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE REMARKABLES DEVELOPMENT PROJECT 2013 – 2015

Ed Bezett and Malcolm Macpherson

THE GRADUATE

Ed Bezett, General Manager Operations at The Remarkables Ski field, Queenstown, New Zealand

WORKPLACE, WORK ENVIRONMENT

The Remarkables Ski Area (RE) is located on the north end of The Remarkables range, in the Rastus Burn Basin approximately 28 km east of Queenstown. It was opened by the Mt Cook Group Ltd in 1985. The company objective was to develop an area within 45 minutes travelling time of Queenstown which is at sufficiently high altitude to eliminate (as far as possible) the lack of snow.

In 2002 the Coronet Peak, Remarkables and Mt Hutt ski operations were sold to what is now NZSki Ltd, a Queenstown consortium led by local businessman John Davies. The medium-term goals for RE in 2010 were 250,000 visitors by 2018, yield increase to \$84 per person, and \$21 m of annual revenue. In the long term the goal is to fully develop the consented ski area and to develop a new area to the southeast known as The Doolans.

NZSki is a seasonal business, with 36 permanent staff, increasing to more than 1,000 in the winter; delivering over 100 individual product offerings, including lessons and lesson packages, equipment and clothing rentals, chairlift rides, food and facilities, ticketing, safety, and transport services. Marketing is on site and online, in conjunction with Tourism New Zealand and the New Zealand Ski Tourism Marketing Network (Ski TMN, a grouping of mountain and snow sports resorts), primarily for customers in New Zealand and Australia, but also recently further afield via the Mountain Collective, a northern hemisphere collaboration.

NZ has 16 commercially operating ski areas, with 1.4 million annual visitors. NZSki is the biggest single operator, commanding on average 38% of the national market and 53% of the very competitive Southern Lakes market. However the ski market in NZ has been stagnant for the last 10 years, with most of the limited growth at The Remarkables coming from the local population growth and a slowly growing Australian market. This is a worldwide trend.

Against this background, Bezett reports that in 2013, following “a lot of in-house talk and discussion ... about developing The Remarkables”, an initial project meeting was held to give effect to a number of years of design and concept work on possible trail, snow making, lift, earthworks and facilities construction.

At the same time resource consent was applied for to build a considerable amount of new snow making infrastructure and carry out substantial earthworks to support the installation of the new lift.

Ed had been working on consenting, snowmaking infrastructure design and budgeting as well as earthworks design and pricing, and had managed the design and installation of \$10 million worth of snow making equipment, and,

he said "... could reasonably say I was one of NZ's leading snowmaking system designers and installers." He was General Manager Operations at The Remarkables before and during the development project that followed. His experience during that period constitutes the substance of his work-based enquiry. He was responsible for overseeing earthworks, infrastructure design and installation that supported the bigger development projects of a chairlift and a new base building, undertaken by outside contractors.

PERSONAL PROFILE

Bezett is from a farming background, who by his account "stumbled into the ski industry by accident", and who says "even after 25 years in the industry, some days when I'm standing on top of a snowy ridge in the sun, or driving a groomer in 50cm of new snow I still think 'how did I end up here?'"

Travelling a lot when younger, Ed struggled to settle into any sort of career: "I used to have annual arguments with my mother about getting a fulltime job. The role I am in now was my first fulltime job, so I was nearly 40 when I finally got a real job. I had already worked 11 ski seasons prior to that, snow making and grooming.

"I have changed over time from being a doer to being an enabler, and that is where I see myself now," he says, "we have very good staff at NZSki and I see one of my roles as making it as easy as possible for them to do their job. This is one of my strengths and I seem to be able to get great engagement out of my staff.

"I have also developed my critical thinking skills over time and am now seeing the big picture of NZSki and am strategically thinking all the time about how we can get there.

"I have also made some mistakes on the way and am always determined to learn from them. I am now a team builder who has got great results from developing staff."

He has a bachelor's degree from Capable NZ, and a range of in-work occupational qualifications: he is a Senior Assessor Mentor; a role appointed to by Skills Active, the Industry Training Organisation; in 2011 he was Leader of the Year (for work mentoring staff, at the time the only manager carrying out that type of training); every year since every Remarkables leader of the year has been a direct report or coached by Ed.

LEARNING GOALS

In his course two learning agreement, Ed specified opportunities for professional development focusing on: interviewing and researching methods; academic and business writing; understanding financial management, business development and operations; strategic reviewing and strategic planning frameworks; and the application of project management models. His overarching goal was to reflect on and draw insights from his first experience of leading a strategic review, and to develop critical perspectives towards business operations and business processes.

PROJECT REPORT AND PORTFOLIO OF EVIDENCE

Brought to assessment was an extensive portfolio, including:

- financial review of the development project, with financial modelling, comparing the start point of the project with its conclusion conclude, and a comparison with the actual performance of the 2016 winter season
- a comprehensive review on the project management of the development
- an explanation of stakeholder involvement and how relationships with stakeholders were managed

- An examination of how the project affected staff, from fulltime management through to seasonal winter staff
- How the project was governed, what executive input was required, and the outcomes
- A review of how NZSki lived up to its organisational mission statement, and its vision and values statements through the development period

In attached appendices were details of the ski area (history, facilities, operating model and performance), a critical review of project management learnings, cost control system examples, a summary of Ed's project management experience at NZSki, a literature review and the PowerPoint presentation that supported his oral assessment presentation.

A financial review package (also an appendix) covered the 2013 pre-project base line, the budget for the 2013 season, the projected spend during the project and projected performance to 2020. There were also spreadsheets on: return on assets, return on equity, payback period, rate of return, and a net present value analysis; actuals for the 2015 winter season (there were questions about the influence of the first stage of the project on performance for that season. Visitor numbers and yield were up, but so were costs, particularly labour); the budget for the 2016 season (the first season after project completion); and the actuals for the 2016 season.



Figure 1. A summary of Ed Bezett's professional development, from completion of a bachelor of applied management in 2012, to a competent, capable, future-focussed leader in 2017

PROJECT OUTCOMES, REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Building part of his final oral presentation on Horwath's (2014) three disciplines of advanced strategic thinking – coalesce, compete and champion – Ed used the development of the ski field access road under his management to illustrate how he planned the future vision, built a new crew with a leader and 15 staff, and raised the bar on service levels.

Leading others to think and act strategically to execute themselves, his self-managing team "... could run itself, set its own strategic goals and improve and innovate on the way it does things." Evidence of success included a road user increase of over 40%; and those that "did not like our road" dropped from 24% to 13%.

Figure 1 maps Ed's professional development. At the time of his assessment (mid 2017) NZSki's Coronet Peak field was going through a change in leadership, to be modelled on the structure at The Remarkables. Ed had been asked to spend 80% of his time over the 2017 winter helping to set up that model, including leadership of the team, recruiting and training the snowmaking and grooming team, building operational leadership skills, and developing the ability to move staff and other resource between Coronet Peak and The Remarkables to ensure the highest quality piste on both ski areas.

Also within his mandate were technical skills development at Coronet Peak and across NZSki for future seasons, identifying candidates to assume greater leadership responsibility at both Coronet Peak and The Remarkables, developing or recruiting a suitable candidate to assume the Slopes Manager role at Coronet Peak, develop a programme for NZSki to be the preferred employer for grooming and snowmaking staff, and identify and encourage opportunities to build communication and synergies between Coronet Peak and The Remarkables slopes teams

Leadership mentoring and development tasks included continue to deliver the staff leadership programme and mentoring across both Coronet Peak and The Remarkables, mentoring and development of grooming and snowmaking Head of Department, and continued support and growth of his operational team at The Remarkables..

Ed Bezett. Ed graduated with a Master of Professional Practice (Distinction) from Otago Polytechnic in 2017. Ed has been a Manager at New Zealand Ski since 2002.

Malcolm McPherson. Malcolm is a facilitator, academic mentor and assessor for CAPABLE NZ, specialising in business excellence. His PhD from the University of Canterbury was on the Environmental Geology of the Avon-Heathcote Estuary. Malcolm is a past Mayor of Central Otago District (three terms), a past member of the Southern District Health Board (four terms), and the Otago Polytechnic Council (2005-2013). He is an elected member (and past chair) of the Central Lakes Trust, a \$300m community funder in Central Otago and Queenstown-Lakes, and chairs several other community organisations, including the Alexandra Men's Shed and the board of Central Stories Museum and Art Gallery. He is chairman of Central Otago Premium Fruit Ltd – an export brand owner intermediating in direct-to-consumer social media marketing in China – and a director of Centennial Health (2013) Ltd. He is a US-qualified Baldrige examiner, and has coached and consulted internationally and written widely on organisational excellence.

REFERENCES:

Horwath, R. (2014). *The Three Disciplines of Advanced Strategic Thinking*. Brisbane, Australia: John Wiley and Sons.