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AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copied of my notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Introduction

My chosen leader in this report will be based on Willie Walsh who was known within the aviation sector and being a prominent leader during his time. He served as a CEO of British Airways between the years of 2005 to 2011 but during his time as a leadership, Walsh **“immediately faced a number of major challenges, including global turndown, increased competition, increasing oil prices and taxes”** (No Name, 2023). He played the most vital key role in transforming British Airways during a period of major changes and later down the line **“He oversaw the merger of British Airways with Iberia in 2011”** (No Name, 2026) becoming another CEO for International Airlines group and marking another vital step with his leadership in the aviation sector.

My purpose of this report is to summarise how Willie Walsh had managed and dealt with changes during his time as being a leader of British Airways and judge his leadership style, decisions and what his approaches were when it came to people and culture. This report will follow onto how Walsh dealt with the issues and how his actions as a leadership would help the wider aviation sector during different changes.

Leadership and change management

Coming into the aviation experience, there has been major changes that has happened throughout the decades that Walsh being the Executive Officer of British Airways has faced during his time. Personally, one of the most significant challenges Walsh has faced would be the **“Owner of British Airways has said he admires his fierce Ryanair rival Michale O’Leary”** (BeITel, 2016). The rise of Ryanair’s low-cost model, driven by Michale O’Leary had then put immense pressure on Walsh to reduce his pricing on British Airways to stay competitive with one another.

Another major concern Walsh had pressure on was the 2008 global financial crisis. Willie Walsh highlight that there would be a drastic change within the airline industry with the rise of fuel pricing and a falling demand. Walsh stated **“We are in the worst trading environment the industry has ever faced,”** (The Standard, 2012) with more depth of **“unprecedented oil prices, economic slowdown and weaker insurer confidence”** (Woodman, 2009) shown pressure to undermine the airline stability and making Walsh make serious decisions. While also Walsh mentioning once again by the news Independent **“I cannot see the bottom of this crisis yet”** and can see some difficulty on the environment **“last for at least another 24**

months". This openly goes to show how Walsh recognised the seriousness of the situation during the time he was at his hardest situation during the financial crisis. In response to these two challenges, Walsh brought in different scenarios which were aimed to strengthen and perform a better outcome for British Airways. Walsh displayed a decisive command in leadership through when he was managing a revamp in his airline with also communication to the outside world. Instead of ignoring the situation Walsh came to terms of the commenting in the House of Commons that **"We can ensure that British Airways will survive through this crisis and that we will have a basis to compete and continue to compete."** (House of Commons, 2020, p121). This goes to highlight how Walsh focus was on the long-term survival for British Airways by giving a strong comment that it will overcome the crisis they are in while enforcing a clear direction to the House of Commons.

This sort of approach goes onto Lewin's Change Management Model, where it goes to explain the change through three stages: unfreeze **"unfreeze current process and perceptions when preparing for upcoming changes"**, change **"employees begin to learn new behaviour, process and ways of thinking"** and Refreeze **"Assuming that the changes made behaviours, processes and ways of thinking are accepted"** (Lucid, 2026). Goes to show Walsh unfreezes the organisation by allowing the crisis to happen and make change to it.

During his time as CEO of British Airways, Willie Walsh proven effective responses to organisational to his people and the company during the change of financial crisis. He showed of competition, he argues that competition would be good for him **"good for business and consumers"** (House of Commons, 2012, p.121) reflecting on his high performance in the organisation. Furthermore, his role in merging with an Iberia gave off future thinking mentioning **"the synergies are fantastic and that's a long-term structural benefit for us"** (Otley, 2013). By being able to focus not he competition and growth opportunities, Walsh guaranteed the airline would be in a good position in the industry for the future.

One example of a case study during change management can be seen in the leadership role during the merge of British Airways and Iberia in 2011, which lead to the ongoing multinational airline IAG (International Airline Group). This decision of Walsh's allowed his airline company to expand in the worldwide. **"The merge will create a strong European airline well able to compete in the 21st Century"**, said

by **BA Willie Walsh (Aviationweek, 2009)**. This statement goes on to reflect how British Airways was merging in a positive aspect for the competition with other airlines. By giving off competitiveness during his time as CEO he positioned himself to be able to achieve a greater scale and have the chance to enhance operational efficiency. This example of the case study goes on to demonstrate the success Walsh has given which changed the whole management aspect of communication, planning and organisation goals with British Airways and Iberia.

Leadership Style, Culture, and People

Willie Walsh will always be well known for his transformative and team-oriented leadership styles. He gave off a clear vision of what he needed to do, direct communication and motivating his employees to give of a high standard service in the organisation. Based on what Culture Amp as mentioned **“the main drivers of employee engagement are:**

- **Learning and development**
- **Leadership**
- **Company performance” (Boogaard, 2026)**

From that given quote from Kat Boogaard, leadership goes on to be one of the most important roles in shaping employee engagement. During Walsh’s time as CEO and CEO of IAG he showed that he made a directive approach on focusing on the company he is on to make sure to give a sense of direction to the employees during changes.

Culture and People Impact

During Willie Walsh time at British Airways, Walsh gave off many styles of his time with managing people, having teamwork and cultural organisation to enable his chance to show the company change during different scenarios.

By showing to his employee's clear communication, during accountability actions he had to give, he persuaded his employees to concentrate on their performance to have more of a successful outcome when Walsh decided to make his changes.

Stated by Walsh, **“I have met a lot of the BA staff in the programme, and they are very passionate about it, believe.” (Saunders, 2020)**. From that quote stated by Walsh it can suggest how his staff can be co-operative with his decisions with suggestions like:

- He has self respect for his employees
- Has engagement with the workforce meeting face to face

- He shows his employees the effort their putting in
- He builds trust with his leadership style and employees

Not only that, but these bullet points can also prove to us that a theory can be introduced. This certainly reflects on John Kotter's 2012 theory. **"Kotter's 8 step change models is a standard road-tested theory for successfully implementing change in the workplace"** (Indeed, 2025)

Overall, these behaviours Willie Walsh is demonstrating during his time as CEO of BA, demonstrates his respect he has towards how workplace and employers which helped the organisation as a whole maintain performance through crisis and changes. The model starts with creating a sense of urgency, leading with a powerful coalition and building/ communicating a vision for change for extra support. It then rolls onto giving action on the vision by giving training to create then a short-term win to build on the momentum, before consolidating gains and lastly have more change in the organisational culture to ensure long term sustainability.

Kotter argues that **"neglecting any of these steps can be enough for the whole initiative to fail"** (Accipio, 2026), showing to us that this is one of many initiatives fails people come across.

Strategic Recommendations for Leadership

Showing off strong leadership style in aviation is a strong performance to having to keep up constantly. Future communication is the main source of practical option I can give. Going off what Kotter says **"a common failing at this point is that change leaders often vastly underestimate the amount of communication that is needed"** (Matsushita, 2017). Which goes to show leaders need that communication barrier with their employees to keep it a two way street. Not having much of a communication barrier with employees can cause problems, stated by Engage for success they mentioned that **"A lack of communication can lead to employee frustration, lower productivity, absenteeism and increased employee turnover"** (Engage for success, no date)

Walsh, settled out many expectations which he accomplished during his time as CEO but yet could still get improved on through guide or feedback from other leaders. **"Leadership communication is more focused on processes than outcomes and learning to live with unresolved situations than providing swift solutions."** (Stensaker, 2024)

In my opinion, it takes a lot of different scenarios where the leader could strengthen their team with communication but also organisational culture with supporting the changes happening. Within British Airways, **“every colleague should strive for Excellence, be caring and open minded” (British Airways, no date)**. This goes onto collaborate with Schein’s 2010 model with the basic three levels:

- Artefacts and symbols
- Exposed Values
- Basic underlying assumptions

Schein highlights that **“it’s sensible to have discussions with as many employees as possible to discover the underlying backgrounds and aspects of the Organizational culture.” (Mulder, 2026)**.

Having the option to get employees involved would be an option that Walsh should have done in the beginning. Kahn theory argues that brining in employee engagement can have a more cohesive effect within the work industry. He also states that **“Engagement as an employee ability to harness their “full set” at work..... Three psychological conditions**

- **Meaningfulness**
- **Safety**
- **Availability” (Radley, 2024)**

Conclusion

In conclusion, showing the strongest leadership wold be the main priority when managing a well-known organisation and making sure that both the culture and the accomplishments of British Airways. From my report written, it has shown that leadership is shown to be the highest approach for Walsh, giving off clear communication, accountability for his actions and involvement with his employees, which has given a positive achievement during the time Walsh was CEO.

Even though there were some downfalls during Walsh’s time at BA, such as relationships with his coworkers and frequent communication during difficult changes. He managed to keep the workforce at ease and made a successful outcome in the long run. Effective communication would be Walsh’s number one communication skills, as his work employees would be supportive with changes and settle on the purpose of why he has done what he done.

To think ahead for the future plan, a number of different recommendations could be taken place to help Walsh succeed in the better future. One point, I would

recommend to him is to keep an open mind with his employees when giving communication, so that his staff are up to date on situation but can also get their views stated as-well. Talking about employees having a say, I think it would be right for them to have a voice in situations where they are out of control because it allows them to build trust with their CEO but also have insights on different solutions to solve the problem.

Overall, by thinking about using these recommendations, the actions during British Airways could change in the long run to make an overall change in the industry.

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