

University of Wales Trinity Saint David
BA (Hons) Leadership and Management Skills for the Workplace
Organisational Culture (LCLM 5005)

Component 1 — Individual Report

Organisational Culture at British Airways

A Critical Evaluation of Structure, Adaptation and Performance

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Programme	BA (Hons) Leadership and Management Skills for the Workplace
Module	Organisational Culture
Module code	LCLM 5005
Module leaders	David Oyebisi; Rameses Manalang
Assessment	Component 1 — Individual Report (70% of module mark)
Word limit	3,000 words $\pm 10\%$
Word count	3,066 words. Excluding cover page, contents, headings, Table 1 and reference list.
Submission date	12 August 2026

*Referencing follows UWTSD Harvard conventions. All sources cited in the text appear in the reference list.
This report is my own work and has not been prepared collaboratively.*

Contents

1. Executive Summary	1
2. Introduction	1
3. Organisational Culture, Structure and Decision-Making	2
4. Identifying the Prevailing Organisational Culture	3
5. Culture and External Environmental Influences	4
6. Culture as an Enabler or Barrier	5
7. Impact on Organisational Performance	5
8. Recommendations	7
9. Conclusion	8
10. Reference List	9

Table 1. British Airways assessed against the nine outcomes of McKinsey's Organizational Health Index	7
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1. Executive Summary

This report examines the culture of British Airways (BA), the principal operating company within International Airlines Group (IAG). Applying Schein, Handy, Hofstede and the Competing Values Framework identifies a control-oriented role culture with a powerful cost and market overlay, fragmented by occupational subcultures among pilots, cabin crew and engineering staff.

Culture and structure reinforce one another. Hierarchy, procedure and financial discipline produce safe and reliable flying, but have also slowed learning and delayed responses to warning signals, as Terminal 5, the 2017 IT failure and the 2020 redundancy programme illustrate. The verdict is therefore domain-specific: culture has enabled BA's technical performance while obstructing its commercial and human performance.

Recent results complicate that picture: record operating profit of £2.23 billion and the best punctuality since 2011 suggest the balance is shifting, though behavioural change in favourable conditions is not yet evidence of changed assumptions. Four recommendations follow, mapped to McKinsey's Organizational Health Index.

2. Introduction

British Airways was formed in 1974 from BOAC and BEA, privatised in 1987, and folded into IAG in 2011. In 2025 it carried 46.3 million passengers to 183 destinations and generated an operating profit of £2.23 billion at a 15.2 per cent margin (IAG, 2026). Yet the same decade brought a record data-protection fine, a systems failure that stranded tens of thousands, the first pilots' strike in its history and parliamentary criticism of its treatment of employees — a combination that makes BA a productive case for cultural analysis.

Mullins and Christy (2016, p. 574) observe that culture, understood as “how things are done around here”, significantly affects decision-making, the design of structure and group behaviour. Schein and Schein (2017) define it as the pattern of shared basic assumptions a group has learned while solving problems of external adaptation and internal integration, then taught to newcomers as correct. Both point the analyst away from what an organisation announces and towards what its members have learned actually works.

Five questions structure what follows: how culture shapes BA's structure and decision-making; what the prevailing culture is; how culture mediates adaptation; whether it is a barrier or an enabler; and what its performance consequences imply for change. McKinsey's Organizational Health Index (OHI) supplies the evaluative lens for the last two.

The scope is BA's mainline UK operation from privatisation to the 2025 financial year, drawing on peer-reviewed literature, parliamentary and regulatory documentation and company reporting. Models of culture simplify a more disordered reality, a limitation on which Alvesson (2013) presses hard.

3. Organisational Culture, Structure and Decision-Making

BA's formal structure is a functional hierarchy inside IAG's federated holding-company model: the subsidiary keeps brand, network and operational management, while capital allocation and margin targets are set centrally. That arrangement is also a cultural artefact, since structure institutionalises leaders' assumptions (Schein and Schein, 2017). The financial discipline established under Willie Walsh is embedded in reporting lines, authority limits and a lean centre with little room for initiatives unable to demonstrate short-run return. Culture and structure are reciprocal, each sustaining the other (Mullins and Christy, 2016).

Procedural formalisation is its most visible expression. Flight operations, engineering and ground handling run on standard operating procedures, licensed competencies and rank-based authority, much of it imposed by the regulator. Reason (1997) argues such formalisation is appropriate wherever a single error can be catastrophic, and BA's safety record indicates it works. The difficulty lies in migration: formalisation designed for the flight deck has spread into domains where it fits poorly, so commercial, digital and service decisions travel upwards, pass through cost review and return slowly. Cameron and Quinn (2011) would classify the result as an internally focused control orientation.

The consequences appear in BA's most damaging failures. The House of Commons Transport Committee (2008) attributed the March 2008 Terminal 5 opening, and its hundreds of cancellations, to insufficient communication between owner and operator and to inadequate training and system testing, BA having deferred familiarisation by six weeks. The knowledge existed; it was never converted into a decision to delay. The May 2017 IT collapse cancelled 726 flights, disrupted 75,000 passengers and cost an initial £80 million (BBC News, 2017), following substantial IT outsourcing. Neither was a failure of information, but of a culture that could not make uncomfortable information consequential where decisions are taken: where cost is the assumed binding constraint, warnings implying expenditure get discounted.

Informal structure complicates this, because BA possesses several cultures organised around occupation and employment history. Pilots hold a professional identity anchored in licensure and seniority, while the creation of Mixed Fleet cabin crew in 2010 on materially inferior terms institutionalised a two-tier workforce whose grievances erupted in industrial action during 2017. Martin's (2002) differentiation perspective illuminates this better than any integrationist account, treating subcultural conflict as the normal condition of a large organisation. Bamber et al. (2009) show such segmentation is characteristic of legacy carriers facing lower-cost entrants, so the pattern is partly structural.

Change is enacted accordingly: consultation has been procedural, meeting legal requirements while leaving employee representatives little real influence, so management pursues change unilaterally, unions resist through disruption, and the cycle repeats. One caveat deserves emphasis: culture cannot explain everything (Alvesson, 2013). Thin margins, Heathrow slot constraints and regulatory obligation independently push BA towards centralised control, and

separating these from cultural preference is difficult.

4. Identifying the Prevailing Organisational Culture

Schein's three-level model offers the best entry point, because it separates what an organisation displays from what it believes. BA's artefacts form a dense symbolic repertoire: the Union Flag tailfin, the “To Fly. To Serve.” motto reinstated in 2011, Concorde heritage, seniority-based rostering, thick operating manuals. Its espoused values appear in the transformation narrative, committing the airline to world-class customer experience, operational excellence, IT modernisation, colleague pride and sustainability (British Airways, 2024).

Basic assumptions, which Schein and Schein (2017) regard as the true culture, must be inferred from behaviour under pressure, and a different set emerges. Four working assumptions are suggested by the evidence: safety comes through procedure and hierarchy; cost is the ultimate constraint against which other commitments are traded; labour is a variable cost to be reset when conditions permit; and flag-carrier status confers loyalty that need not be earned. The 2020 redundancy programme illustrates the third: the House of Commons Transport Committee (2020, para. 80) called BA's treatment of its workforce a national disgrace, and dismissal-and-re-engagement threats cannot be reconciled with espoused commitments to colleague pride. Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2015) found that advertised values bear no relationship to performance, whereas perceptions of managerial integrity do — which locates the gap's significance precisely.

Applying Handy's (1993) typology, BA is predominantly a role culture: authority derives from position, coordination from rules, security from predictability. Above it a power culture operates at group level, where a small executive centre dominates investment; task cultures appear in network planning and digital teams, and pilots display features of a person culture. Handy's typology is a heuristic, not a measurement instrument, but the multiplicity matters: BA is not a single culture with pockets of deviation.

Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov's (2010) dimensions require caution, since they compare national cultures and have been criticised for inferring national values from workplace surveys. Used carefully they expose an instructive divergence: the United Kingdom scores low on power distance and uncertainty avoidance and high on individualism, yet BA displays moderate power distance and high uncertainty avoidance in its non-safety functions. An organisational culture can therefore run against its national context, indicating the strength of BA's institutional inheritance.

The Competing Values Framework provides the most defensible synthesis. Cameron and Quinn (2011) distinguish clan, adhocracy, market and hierarchy orientations; BA is weighted heavily towards hierarchy with a strong secondary market orientation. Clan characteristics are weak, given low trust and recurrent industrial conflict, and adhocracy weaker still, given late

and reactive digital investment. Hartnell et al. (2019) find in meta-analysis that control cultures are associated with efficiency, market cultures with financial results, and clan cultures with employee attitudes; BA's margins alongside mixed employee and service outcomes map onto that pattern. Bogale and Debela's (2024) review of fifty-two studies finds researchers using markedly different dimension sets, so no single framework suffices alone — which supports the layered approach taken here.

The prevailing culture is therefore a control-oriented role culture with a dominant cost-market overlay, fragmented by occupational subcultures, in which a strong safety culture coexists with a contested and unevenly enacted service culture.

5. Culture and External Environmental Influences

Competition has been the most persistent external pressure: low-cost carriers with lower short-haul unit costs, Gulf and Asian carriers with superior long-haul product. BA's response was assimilative — unbundled fares, buy-on-board catering from 2017, densified cabins. The commercial logic was sound; the cultural effect incoherent, because an organisation whose identity rests on premium national service adopted its competitors' practices. Chatman and O'Reilly (2016) argue cultural effectiveness depends on the intensity and consistency of shared norms, not their content; judged by that criterion, 2016 to 2020 weakened BA's culture instead of adapting it.

Regulation exerts a second influence, and BA's response is strikingly uneven. Safety regulation is so deeply internalised that compliance is experienced as professional identity; newer domains have been absorbed far less successfully. The 2018 data breach produced a £20 million penalty, the regulator identifying failures in security measures available at the time (Information Commissioner's Office [ICO], 2020).

Technological change exposes the same asymmetry: legacy systems, built up through decades of incremental development and outsourcing, constrained resilience and customer experience. The response is substantial: £750 million of the £7 billion programme goes to operational systems and cloud migration, alongside more than 1,200 completed improvement projects (IAG, 2026). Whether this is cultural adaptation or well-funded catching up is a fair question, since the investment followed the reputational costs of inaction rather than preceding them.

Sustainability is a third pressure. BA Better World commits the airline to net zero by 2050, and sustainable aviation fuel reached 4.5 per cent of total fuel in 2025, the highest share within IAG (British Airways, 2026) — though an industry facing legitimacy challenges has obvious incentives to publicise such progress. The pandemic then showed BA's adaptive capacity to be financial: capacity and headcount were cut decisively, and the skills shortages and disruption of 2022 followed directly from decisions taken in 2020. Kotter and Heskett's (1992) distinction between strong and adaptive cultures is apt: BA's culture has been strong in its cohesion around cost and procedure, weak in the anticipatory adjustment adaptiveness

requires.

6. Culture as an Enabler or Barrier

The case for culture as an enabler rests on operational reliability at scale. Coordinating 308,000 flights a year across 183 destinations demands standardisation, and BA's procedural culture delivers it. Its safety record is the strongest evidence that assumptions about procedure, checking and hierarchy produce outcomes no individual competence could achieve (Reason, 1997). The March 2025 Heathrow power outage is a recent test: more than 700 flights were cancelled, yet over 95 per cent of the schedule was running again within days (British Airways, 2026). That is crisis discipline, cultural as much as technical. Barney's (1986) criteria apply: such an operational culture is valuable, rare and difficult to imitate.

The case for culture as a barrier is equally substantial. Fragmentation between employee groups has repeatedly turned managerial decisions into industrial disputes, most seriously the 2017 cabin crew action and the 2019 pilots' strike, which IAG put at £121 million (Business Traveller, 2019). Gittell's (2016) relational coordination model shows airline performance depends on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect across occupational boundaries; BA's employment history has eroded all three. The cost-first assumption has also undermined the service promise the brand depends on and generated ethical exposure: in the 2020 dismissal-and-re-engagement threat and the security failures behind the 2018 breach, employee and customer interests were subordinated to cost, with legitimacy consequences outlasting the savings (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Hierarchy has suppressed the psychological safety learning depends on (Edmondson and Bransby, 2023), helping explain why weak signals about IT fragility and Terminal 5 readiness failed to travel upwards.

A single verdict would obscure more than it revealed. In the technical domain BA's culture is unambiguously an enabler; in the commercial, service and human domains it has been predominantly a barrier. The two are connected: a mindset treating reliability as the product of compliance tends to treat service and innovation as compliance problems too. Taking 2008 to 2022 as a whole, this report judges culture a net barrier, because BA's principal failures were of learning, trust and responsiveness, not capability or capital.

That judgement is under revision: record punctuality, a Net Promoter Score up 10.5 points and sustained investment (British Airways, 2026; IAG, 2026) indicate real change. Schein and Schein (2017) would caution that changed behaviour in favourable conditions is not yet evidence of changed assumptions. The test will come when margins are next under pressure.

7. Impact on Organisational Performance

The consequences are visible on both sides of the ledger. Financially, the control and market orientation compares well with global peers: operating profit of £2.23 billion in 2025, up £182 million at a 15.2 per cent margin, within IAG's record group profit of €5.0 billion (IAG, 2026).

Cost discipline, capacity restraint and premium-cabin focus are cultural as much as strategic behaviours, and have been rewarded.

Operationally, punctuality reached its highest level since 2011, with 80 per cent of flights departing within fifteen minutes of schedule, up from 73 per cent in 2024 (British Airways, 2026); IAG identifies on-time performance as the largest driver of customer satisfaction (IAG, 2026). This supports Gittell's (2016) proposition that culture affects performance through the quality of coordination, not values in the abstract.

The costs are equally quantifiable: £80 million for the 2017 systems failure (BBC News, 2017), £20 million for the 2018 breach (ICO, 2020), and £121 million for the 2019 strike, which cancelled 2,325 flights (Business Traveller, 2019). Each was, in cultural terms, an avoidable failure of escalation or employment relations. Reputational damage from the 2020 redundancy programme is harder to price, but hit consumer sentiment and the employer brand just before BA recruited at scale.

Viewed through the OHI, which links management practices to nine outcomes across 64 companies and 252,339 respondents, the pattern is coherent: BA is strong on coordination and control and weak on motivation, work environment, accountability, and innovation and learning, and its results mirror that distribution (Keller and Schaninger, 2019). Table 1 sets out the diagnosis.

The relationship runs in reverse too: profitability funds the £7 billion programme and punctuality lowers disruption costs. Schneider et al. (2017) note culture and outcomes are reciprocally related, so BA may be entering a reinforcing cycle after a long degrading one.

Table 1. British Airways assessed against the nine outcomes of McKinsey's Organizational Health Index

Management practices that drive the outcome	Organisational outcome	Average improvement (points)	Assessment of British Airways
Shared vision; strategic clarity; employee involvement	Direction	11	Mixed – clear strategy, weak employee involvement.
Top-down innovation; bottom-up innovation; knowledge sharing	Innovation and learning	10	Weak – reactive digital investment and poor upward learning.
Authoritative, consultative, supportive and challenging leadership	Leadership	9	Narrow – mainly authoritative, limited consultation.
People performance review; operational, financial and risk management; professional standards	Coordination and control	7	Strong – safety and operational discipline.
Talent acquisition and development; process-based capabilities; outsourced expertise	Capabilities	5	Uneven – strong operational skills, weaker internal IT capability.
Meaningful values; inspirational leaders; career opportunities; incentives; recognition	Motivation	5	Weak – workforce segmentation and low trust.
Open and trusting; internally competitive; operationally disciplined; creative and entrepreneurial	Work environment	5	Mixed – disciplined but low psychological safety.
Role clarity; performance contracts; consequence management; personal ownership	Accountability	3	Weak – strong cost accountability, weak service ownership.
Capturing external ideas; customer focus; competitive insight; partnerships; government and community relations	External orientation	3	Mixed – strong regulatory focus, weaker customer orientation.

Framework adapted from McKinsey's Organizational Health Index ($n = 64$ companies, 252,339 respondents), as presented in Keller and Schaninger (2019). The assessment of British Airways is derived from the evidence analysed in Sections 3 to 7.

8. Recommendations

The recommendations follow from Table 1 and are mapped to the OHI, where Direction, Innovation and learning, and Leadership generate the largest gains in organisational health, while Accountability and External orientation improve least unless deliberately managed (Keller and Schaninger, 2019).

1. Direction and leadership: close the espoused–enacted gap. Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2015) show that only employee-perceived integrity, not published values, is associated with performance. BA should commission an independent biennial culture audit. Chatman (2024) supplies the method: her Organizational Culture Profile asks employees to rank the norms they observe, not their own attitudes, then compares the current culture against the one the strategy requires and quantifies the gap, turning the espoused–enacted problem from an assertion into a measurement. Chatman finds most organisations need to reprioritise existing norms, not replace them wholesale. Executive incentives should weight colleague-trust and service measures alongside margin, since leadership behaviour is the primary mechanism by which

values become real (Warrick, 2017). Widening the repertoire from authoritative towards consultative and supportive styles addresses the practices that most drive health.

2. Motivation and work environment: dismantle workforce segmentation. The two-tier model created durable conflict with quantifiable costs. Following Gittell (2016), BA should harmonise terms across crew communities and establish standing joint forums with BALPA and Unite addressing operational design, not only pay. In OHI terms this targets meaningful values, recognition and an open and trusting environment; fewer and cheaper disputes should follow.

3. Innovation, learning and capabilities: build adhocracy deliberately. BA is weakest in the innovation quadrant (Cameron and Quinn, 2011), so improvement projects should not stay governed by the control that suppressed earlier innovation. Cross-functional digital and service teams need delegated authority within defined budget limits, assessment against validated learning, and explicit psychological safety practices (Edmondson and Bransby, 2023). Rebalancing from outsourced expertise towards internal talent development would strengthen bottom-up innovation and knowledge sharing, the practices BA has most underused. Three management information systems would support this. First, the Operations Control Centre already funded under the transformation programme should become a single operational data platform, so disruption, crew, engineering and baggage data inform one decision picture. Second, a culture dashboard should carry Organizational Culture Profile results, attrition, grievance and speak-up data to board level quarterly, giving human outcomes the reporting discipline reserved for financial ones. Third, a knowledge management system should index post-incident learning, since Terminal 5 and 2017 both involved knowledge that never reached the decision-makers.

4. Accountability, ethics and external orientation. BA's ethical failures have been systemic, and Carroll (2016) argues ethical responsibilities cannot hold where economic decisions routinely override them. BA should extend its confidential safety-reporting culture into a group-wide speak-up and near-miss system covering IT, ground operations, service and employment, reporting to a board committee (Reason, 1997); audit outsourced ground-handling, catering and IT partners independently; publish a fair-labour commitment precluding a repeat of 2020; and subject BA Better World claims to external verification. This addresses consequence management and personal ownership under Accountability, and community relations under External orientation.

9. Conclusion

British Airways demonstrates that organisational culture is neither uniformly helpful nor uniformly obstructive, and that judgements must be domain-specific. The frameworks applied here identify a control-oriented role culture with a dominant cost and market overlay, fragmented by occupational subcultures and marked by real distance between espoused and operating assumptions. That culture is bound to a centralised structure and to decisions that

privileged financial caution over operational warning; Terminal 5, the 2017 collapse and the 2020 redundancy programme are the visible results.

Its influence on adaptation has been similarly uneven, strong where regulation is long internalised, weak where change is novel. Across the period examined culture has been a net barrier, offset but not cancelled by genuine excellence in safety and reliability, with the sharpest deficits in motivation, accountability and innovation.

Recent financial and operational records suggest a turning point. Whether it endures depends on whether the assumptions beneath the behaviour have changed, which will only become visible when trading conditions are less favourable.

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