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The Organisational Culture within

British Airways



Figure 1: British Airways Logo. Source: <https://www.logodesignlove.com/british-airways-logo-evolution>

1.Introduction

This report analyses the organisational structure of British Airways (BA). The flag carrier airline of the United Kingdom. Historically rooted in a rigid, bureaucratic, and civil-service mindset, dating back to its origins as a state-owned enterprise, BA underwent a radical structural transformation during its privatisation in the 1980s under Lord King and Sir Colin Marshall, rebranding itself as the “World’s Favourite Airline”. However, the 9/11 downturns, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2011 consolidation into the International Airlines Group (IAG), and the catastrophic disruptions of the early 2020s global pandemic have continually tested BA’s cultural resilience (Cozmuta, 2024).

BA currently operates within a highly macro-environment characterized by intense pressure from Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs) like Ryanair and EasyJet, premium competition from Middle Eastern carriers (e.g., Emirates, Qatar Airways). With volatile fuel markets, rapid digitization, the complex operational recovery post-pandemic frameworks, this report critically investigates how BA’s institutional culture interacts with its structural design, decision-making frameworks, environmental responsiveness,

and financial and operational performance, and propose evidence-based recommendations for improvement (Majerová and Jirásek, 2023).

2. Organisation Culture at British Airways

Organisational culture refers to the shared beliefs, assumptions, values and behaviours that influence how employees perform their work (Schein, 2021). Rather than existing as formal organisational rules, culture develops gradually through leadership, organisational history, employee interactions and shared experiences.

British Airways has historically positioned itself as a premium global airline with an organisational identity built around customer service, operational safety and professionalism. These values have been reinforced through extensive employee training, leadership development and operational procedures. The company's culture emphasises reliability, international excellence and customer satisfaction while maintaining one of the strongest aviation safety records (British Airways, 2024).

Despite these achievements, British Airways has experienced cultural challenges. Industrial disputes involving cabin crew, restructuring programmes, outsourcing, and cost-reduction initiatives have occasionally weakened employee trust and organisational commitment (Bamber et al., 2020). These examples demonstrate that organisational culture remains dynamic and continually evolves alongside organisational strategy.

Consequently, British Airways currently exhibits characteristics of a performance-oriented service culture, combined with an increasing emphasis on innovation, sustainability, and operational resilience (Flouris and Oswald, 2016).



Figure 1: Organisational structure: Self-produced.

2A. The Influence of Organisational Culture on Structure and Decision-Making

Organisational culture significantly influences organisational structure because shared values determine how authority, communication and responsibilities are distributed throughout the organisation (Mullins and Christy, 2016).

British Airways operates a hierarchical organisational structure typical of major international airlines. Operational departments such as engineering, flight operations, customer services, finance and commercial management are coordinated through formal reporting relationships designed to maintain safety, regulatory compliance and operational consistency (Flouris and Oswald, 2016).

The airline's culture strongly reinforces this structure because aviation requires strict adherence to procedures and clearly defined responsibilities. Safety culture encourages employees to follow established protocols rather than making individual decisions that could increase operational risk. Consequently, decision-making within operational departments remains relatively centralised (Reason, 2016).

However, organisational culture also encourages collaboration across departments. Customer service initiatives require cabin crew, airport staff, engineers, digital teams and senior managers to coordinate activities that improve passenger experiences. This reflects a more collaborative organisational culture than is traditionally found in highly bureaucratic organisations (Gittell, 2003).

Leadership also influences decision-making. (Schein, 2021) argue that leaders both create and reinforce organisational culture through their decisions. British Airways' senior leadership has increasingly promoted innovation by investing in digital technologies, sustainability programmes, and customer experience improvements (International Airlines Group, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of organisational culture during crisis decision-making. Passenger demand declined dramatically during 2020, forcing British Airways to make difficult decisions regarding workforce reductions, route suspensions and operational restructuring (IATA, 2021). Although these decisions were financially necessary, criticism emerged regarding employee consultation and communication, suggesting that aspects of organisational culture limited effective stakeholder engagement (Bamber et al., 2020).

Similarly, Brexit required rapid strategic decision-making concerning regulatory compliance, staffing arrangements and international operating rights. British Airways adapted by strengthening organisational flexibility while working closely with regulators to minimise operational disruption (International Airlines Group, 2023).

These examples demonstrate that organisational culture both supports disciplined operational decision-making and occasionally constrains organisational responsiveness. When employee engagement is insufficient.

3. British Airways' Organisational Culture via Schein's Model

To diagnose the nature of British Airways' culture, Edgar Schein's Three Levels of Culture Model provides an indispensable analytical framework. (Schein, 2010) conceptualises culture as a triad comprising visible Artefacts, Underlying Espoused Values, and deeply embedded Basic Underlying assumptions.

3.1 Level 1: Artefacts

Artefacts represent the visible, audible, and tangible manifestations of an organisation's culture (Schein, 2010). At British Airways, artefacts are highly pronounced and serve to reinforce national heritage, prestige, and professional hierarchy:

- **Physical Architecture and Space:** The Corporate headquarters, Waterside, designed with an indoor 'street' environment, was explicitly intended to foster open communication and break down barriers (e-architect, 2024). However, the physical separation of Waterside from the core operational hubs at Heathrow Terminal 5 and Gatwick physically mirrors the divide between corporate strategy and frontline execution. Terminal 5 itself stands as a massive technical artefact, symbolising global scale, architectural modernity, and operational consolidation (e-architect, 2025).
- **Symbols and Dress Codes:** The British Airways uniform (designed by high-profile couturiers, recently updated by Ozwald Boateng) is a powerful artifact. It encodes authority, professionalism, and national identity, projecting the image of a premium global carrier. The historic 'Speedbird' logo and the Union Jack livery on aircraft tails visually assert the airline's legacy status. Within the office and operational environments, strict dress codes and visible identification badges denote rank, clearance, and specific functional loyalty (British Airways, 2023; Boateng, 2023).
- **Language and Rituals:** uses a highly specific vocabulary filled with acronyms such as IFE (In-flight Entertainment), CRM (Crew Resource Management), Pax (Passengers), ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival), and slots that require extensive socialisation to master, effectively serving as both exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms. Rituals include formal crew briefings prior to all flights and legacy retirement celebrations, which reinforce historical continuity, collective identity, and a sense of institutional permanence. (British Airways, 2023; ICAO, 2021).

3.2. Level 2: Espoused Values

Espoused values encompass the stated strategies, goals, philosophies, and justifications put forward by leadership (Schein, 2010). They represent the idealized

image the organisation wishes to project internally and externally. BA's primary espoused values include:

- 'To Fly. To Serve': This historic motto, revived in the 2010s, encapsulates the dual commitment to operational execution ('To Fly') and premium customer service ('To Serve').
- Safety and Security First: Explicitly stated across all corporate communications, annual reports, and training manuals as the non-negotiable bedrock of the airline's operations (British Airways, 2025).
- Sustainability and Modernisation: Driven by IAG's commitment to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. BA's contemporary corporate materials heavily emphasize values of environmental stewardship, digital innovation, and diversity and inclusion (BA Better World Initiative).

3.3 Level 3: Basic Underlying Assumptions

Basic underlying assumptions are the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that form the ultimate source of values and actions (Schein, 2010). These are difficult to alter because they provide cognitive stability and psychological safety to members. At BA, several deep assumptions drive behaviour:

- **The Assumption of Safety Immutability:** 'We operate in a hazardous environment; any deviation from established protocol will lead to catastrophe.' This assumption runs deep through engineering and flight operations, engendering an instinctive resistance to rapid changes or disruptive operational shifts by commercial managers (CAA, 2023; ICAO, 2021).
- **The Assumption of Legacy Prestige:** 'We are British Airways; our heritage and national significance inherently insulate us from total obsolescence.' reflects a deeply embedded cultural assumption that can generate a sense of complacency and entitlement, making the workforce slow to respond to the aggressive operating models of low-cost competitors. (Schein, 2010; Morrell & Swan, 2006)
- **The Assumption of Functional Division:** 'My primary loyalty belongs to my functional group (e.g., pilots, cabin crew) rather than corporate management, which does not fully comprehend our unique operational realities.' This underlying assumption maintains the adversarial 'us versus them' dynamic

between organised labour unions (such as BALPA and Unite) and BA executive leadership (Blyton & Turnbull, 2004; Gittel, 2003).

3.4 Determination of the Prevailing Culture

To further classify BA's culture, it is useful to apply these levels through Cameron and Quinn's (2022) competing values framework (CVF), where British Airways exhibits a highly fragmented, dual- dominated culture. The prevailing corporate-operational infrastructure is fundamentally anchored in a Hierarchy Culture, which prioritises internal control, formalisation, stability, and predictability. This is driven by regulatory compliance and safety mandates.

Concurrently, the marketing and customer-facing divisions continually seek to cultivate a Market Culture that emphasises competitiveness, customer responsiveness, and market share (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Because, these two cultures possess conflicting orientations, one focusing on internal control and adherence to process, the other on external adaptation and commercial speed. BA suffers from ongoing internal tension. The Hierarchical culture remains the dominant guideline, frequently dragging down market-driven agility through heavy bureaucratic mechanisms (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Denison, 1990).

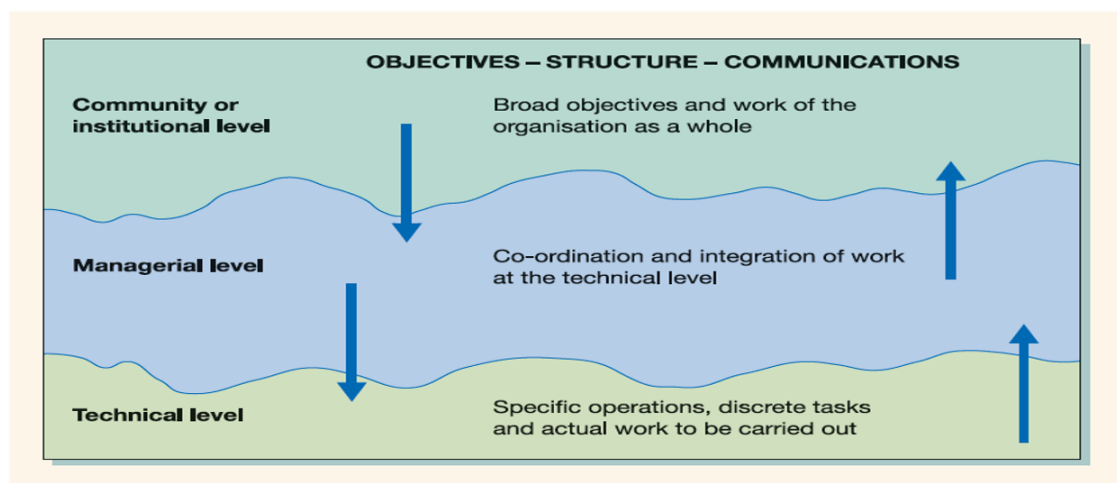


Figure 2: Objectives–Structure–Communications Model. Source: Mullins, L.J. (2019) *Management and Organisational Behaviour*. 12th edn. Harlow: Pearson.

4. Cultural Adaptation to External Environmental Influences (PESTLE).

British Airways operates in a changing macro- environment shaped by political, social, technological, legal, and environmental forces. These external pressures require cultural adaptability (IATA, 2023; Deloitte, 2024; ICAO, 2021).

4.1 Political influences

Political forces have historically shaped BA's identity, from its origin as a state-owned carrier to its current position within IAG (Graham, 2013). Post-Brexit regulatory changes required BA to renegotiate air service agreements and adapt to new labour mobility restrictions (Civil Aviation Authority, 2021). These political shifts reinforced BA's role-oriented, compliance-driven culture, characterised by formal procedures, hierarchical structures, and high uncertainty avoidance. Government sustainability policies, including the UK's Jet Zero Strategy, have also pushed BA to cultivate a more innovation-oriented culture (Department for Transport, 2022). The airline's 'BA Better World' programme reflects a cultural shift toward long-term thinking, environmental responsibility, and cross-functional collaboration (British Airways, 2023).

4.2 Economic Influences

The aviation industry is highly sensitive to economic fluctuations, and BA's culture has been significantly shaped by the economic shocks of the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented financial losses, prompting BA to implement cost-cutting measures, restructure its workforce, and streamline operations (IATA, 2021; British Airways, 2021). These actions reinforced a performance-driven, managerialist culture, prioritising efficiency, financial discipline, and centralised decision-making.

Rising inflation, changing fuel prices, and competitive pressures from low-cost carriers have further rooted BA's emphasis on efficiency and productivity. At the same time, economic competition has encouraged BA to invest in improving the customer experience, promoting a cultural shift toward task-oriented collaboration within digital transformation and service enhancement teams (International Air Transport Association, 2023).

4.3 Social Influences

Social expectations have become a major driver of cultural change at BA. Customers increasingly demand seamless digital experiences, personalised service, and high standards of hygiene and safety. These expectations have pushed BA to adopt a more customer-centric culture, emphasising empathy, service quality, and responsiveness (McKinsey, 2023).

Workforce demographics also influence BA's cultural evolution. With employees from over 90 nationalities, BA must integrate diverse cultural perspectives into a coherent organisational culture. This has encouraged BA to strengthen its focus on inclusion, cross-cultural communication, and leadership development (Robbins and Judge, 2022; Bratton, 2023).

Employee relations remain a critical social factor. BA's history of industrial disputes, including cabin crew strikes and pay disputes, reflects a culture that has sometimes prioritised managerial control over employee voice. Recent efforts to rebuild trust, improve communication, and restore pay benefits indicate a cultural shift toward participation and dialogue (British Airways, 2023).

4.4 Technology Influences

Technological change is one of the most significant external forces shaping BA's culture. The airline has invested heavily in digital transformation, including:

- Ai-enabled customer service
- Automated check-in and boarding
- Predictive maintenance systems
- Data analytics for operational efficiency

These technological initiatives require a culture that supports innovation, experimentation, and cross-functional collaboration. As a result, BA is gradually shifting from a predominantly role culture to a more task-oriented culture, particularly within digital, IT, and customer experience teams (Deloitte, 2024; McKinsey, 2023).

Cybersecurity threats have also influenced BA's cultural priorities. Following the 2018 data breach and subsequent regulatory penalties, BA strengthened its risk management and data governance practices. This reinforced a culture of high

uncertainty avoidance, emphasising vigilance, accountability, and procedural compliance (British Airways, 2024).

4.5 Legal Influences

Legal requirements in aviation are extensive, covering safety, employment, data protection, and consumer rights. BA's culture has long been shaped by the need to comply with:

- Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) regulations (Civil Aviation Act 1972)
- European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) standards (2002)
- International Air Transport Association (IATA) guidelines (January 1, 2026)
- GDPR data protection requirements (25 May 2018)

These legal pressures reinforce BA's bureaucratic role culture, characterised by formal rules, documentation, and hierarchical oversight.

Employment law has also shaped BA's cultural evolution. Legal constraints around redundancies, pay negotiations, and working conditions have pushed BA to adopt more transparent and consultative practices, particularly following public criticism of its 'fire and rehire' approach during the pandemic. This has encouraged a shift toward a more ethical and employee-centred culture (Civil Aviation Authority, 2023).

4.6 Environmental Influences

Environmental pressures are amongst the most transformative external influences on BA. Climate change, sustainability expectations, and environmental activism have forced BA to rethink its strategic priorities and cultural values. Key environmental pressures include:

- Carbon reduction requirements.
- Investment in sustainable aviation fuel (SAF).
- Fleet modernisation.
- Waste reduction and recycling.

In response, BA has developed a sustainability-oriented culture through its 'BA Better World' initiative, promoting long-term thinking, innovation, and cross-departmental collaboration. Operational disruptions caused by extreme weather events also

reinforce BA's risk-reverse, safety-driven culture, requiring rapid adaptation and robust contingency planning (British Airways, 2023).

5. Culture as a Barrier or Enabler to Organisational Functioning.

Organisational culture can simultaneously support and constrain organisational effectiveness. Within British Airways, evidence suggests that culture acts as both an enabler and a barrier, depending on the organisational context.

Culture as an Enabler

British Airways' organisational culture contributes positively to organisational performance in several ways.

First, its emphasis on safety, professionalism and standardisation supports the airline's ability to operate within one of the world's highly regulated industries. Clear procedures, accountability and disciplined decision-making reduce operational risk and contribute to passenger confidence.

Second, the culture promotes consistency in service delivery across a global network. Standard operating procedures ensure that customers experience comparable service standards regardless of destination (IATA, 2023; British Airways, 2023).

Third, BA's investment in leadership development and employee capability demonstrates recognition that organisational culture contributes directly to long-term competitiveness. Leadership programmes, employee recognition initiatives and organisational health surveys are intended to strengthen engagement and reinforce desired behaviours (Deloitte, 2024).

Finally, the organisation's culture supports strategic resilience. During both Brexit and Covid-19, established governance systems enabled the rapid implementation of complex organisational changes while maintaining operational safety (British Airways, 2023).

Culture as a Barrier

Despite these strengths, aspects of BA's culture may also restrict organisational effectiveness.

A predominantly hierarchical culture can reduce employee empowerment and limit innovation. Decision-making concentrated at senior levels may discourage frontline staff from contributing ideas or responding flexibly to operational challenges (Gittell, 2003; Blyton & Turnbull, 2004).

Furthermore, historical industrial disputes suggest that communication between management and employees has not always been effective. Employee resistance to organisational change can emerge when strategic decisions are perceived as inconsistent with organisational values.

Another limitation concerns organisational agility. Airlines increasingly compete through digital innovation, customer experience and operational flexibility. Organisations characterised by excessive bureaucracy may respond more slowly to technological and market change than competitors with more adaptive cultures.

Consequently, British Airways faces the challenge of maintaining the discipline required for aviation safety while fostering greater collaboration, innovation and employee participation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

6.Impact of Organisational Culture on Organisational Performance

Organisational culture has a direct and measurable impact on BA's performance across operational, financial, customer, and employee-related dimensions. The following analysis demonstrates how cultural strengths and weaknesses shape BA's overall effectiveness.

6.1 Operational Performance

6.1.1 Strengths

BA's strong safety culture ensures compliance with regulatory standards and reduces operational risk. Standardised procedures support reliability and punctuality, contributing to BA's reputation as a safe and dependable airline. This cultural strength is essential in an industry where safety failures can have catastrophic consequences.

6.1.2 Weaknesses

However, BA’s bureaucratic processes slow down operational decision-making and reduce flexibility. Departments often struggle to coordinate effectively during disruptions, leading to delays, cancellations, and inconsistent service delivery. These operational weaknesses are exacerbated by cultural resistance to change, limiting BA’s ability to adopt more agile operational models (British Airways, 2024).

6.2 Financial Performance

6.2.1 Positive Impacts

BA’s cost-focused culture supports financial discipline, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. Performance metrics drive accountability and help align organisational behaviour with financial goals. This cultural orientation has enabled BA to navigate economic shocks, including the pandemic and rising fuel costs.

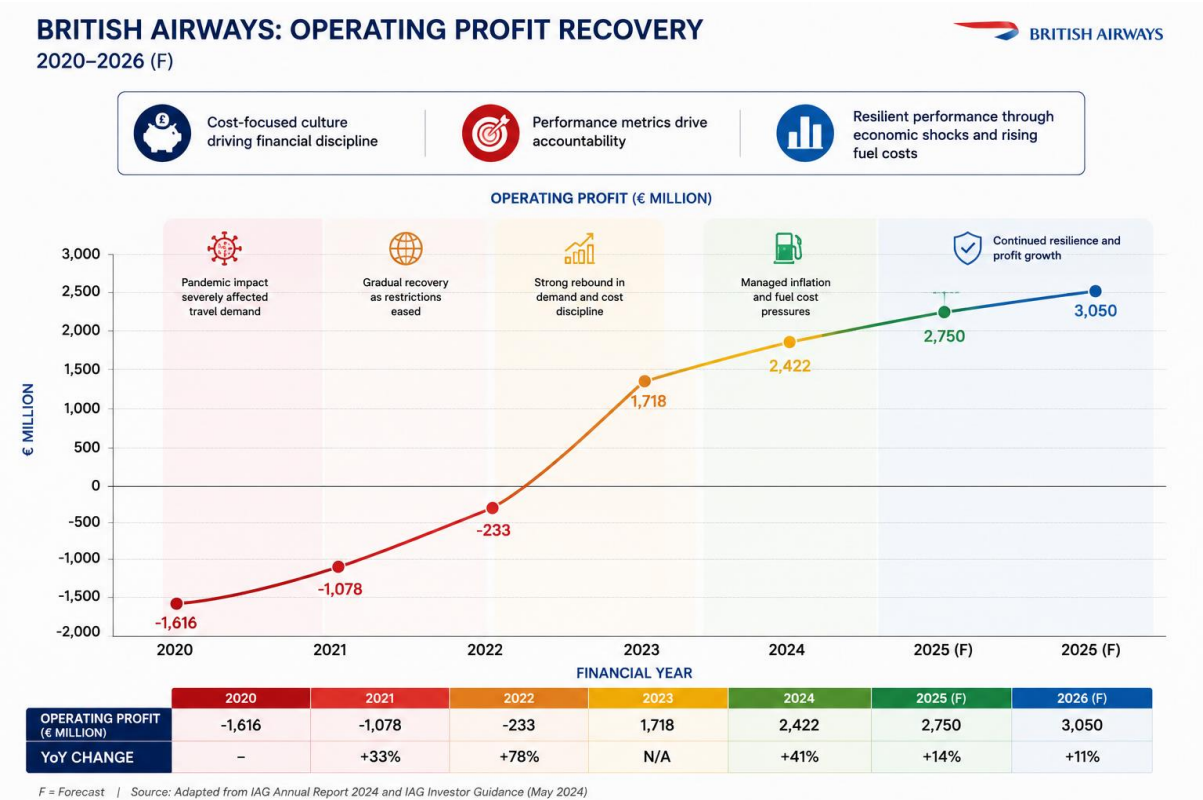


Figure 3: Source: Self-Produced

6.2.2 Negative Impacts

However, BA's managerialist culture has also contributed to financial losses through industrial disputes, compensation claims, and reputation damage. Customer dissatisfaction resulting from service failures and employee unrest can reduce revenue and brand loyalty. These financial consequences highlight the importance of cultural alignment with employee and customer expectations (IAG Annual Report, 2024).

6.3 Cultural Experience Performance

6.3.1 Improvements

BA's recent investments in customer experience reflect a cultural shift toward service excellence. Improvements in cabin design, catering, and digital interfaces have enhanced the customer journey and strengthened BA's competitive position in the premium market, supporting greater brand differentiation and reinforcing customer loyalty across key long-haul segments (British Airways, 2023; McKinsey, 2023).

6.3.2 Ongoing Challenges

Despite these improvements, service inconsistency remains a challenge due to workforce morale issues and legacy IT systems. Cultural fragmentation between frontline staff and management contributes to uneven service delivery, undermining customer satisfaction (Deloitte, 2024; McKinsey, 2023; British Airways, 2023).

6.4 Employee Performance and Engagement

6.4.1 Strengths

BA's strong training culture ensures that employees are well-prepared for safety-critical tasks. Clear role expectations support accountability and operational consistency (British Airways, 2024).

6.4.2 Weaknesses

However, low trust, limited employee voice, and perceived managerial dominance reduce engagement and performance. Research by Macey & Schneider (2020) shows that employee engagement is strongly correlated with organisational performance, suggesting that BA's cultural weaknesses in this area have significant implications.

7. Recommendations for Cultural Improvement

7.1 Promote a More participative leadership style

BA should encourage greater employee involvement in decision-making. While hierarchical structures are essential for maintaining safety and regulatory compliance, greater participation in operational and organisational decisions would improve employee engagement and commitment.

7.2 Develop a More Adaptive Organisational Culture

British Airways should continue developing an organisational culture that balances operational discipline with innovation. This does not require abandoning hierarchical controls and discipline but rather complementing them with greater empowerment at operational levels. Cameron and Quinn Competing Values Framework suggests that organisations benefit from balancing hierarchy with elements of adhocracy, encouraging innovation, creativity and continuous improvement. Increasing employee autonomy where operational risk is low would improve responsiveness while maintaining safety standards (Cameron and Quinn, 2024).

7.3 Strengthen Internal Communication

British Airways should continue investing in leadership communication training, regular employee engagement surveys and digital communication platforms that encourage two-way dialogue between senior management and frontline employees. Improved communication would reinforce the organisation's espoused values while reducing uncertainty during future organisational change.

If British Airways does not make these cultural improvements, Virgin Atlantic is likely to benefit the most. Virgin Atlantic is British Airways' main full-service competitor in the UK and competes by providing high-quality customer service and a positive employee experience. If British Airways continues to have low employee engagement, poor communication and a less flexible leadership style, it may lead to lower customer satisfaction and higher staff turnover. This could give Virgin Atlantic a stronger position in the market (Cameron and Quinn, 2024). However, if British Airways implements these recommendations, it can improve employee performance, customer service and overall competitiveness, helping to reduce Virgin Atlantic's competitive advantage (Schein and Schein, 2021).

7.4 Continue Investment in Leadership Development

British Airways has already invested in leadership capability through programmes designed to improve coaching, engagement and people management. These initiatives should continue, with greater emphasis on transformational leadership behaviours that inspire collaboration, innovation and employee development. Transformation leaders encourage organisational learning, foster psychosocial safety and create cultures where employees are more willing to contribute ideas for continuous improvement.

7.5 Install Sustainability into organisational Culture

Environmental sustainability is becoming increasingly important within the aviation sector. British Airways has committed to reducing carbon emissions and investing in sustainable aviation fuel and fleet modernisation. However, sustainability should become embedded within everyday organisational behaviours rather than remaining solely a strategic objective. Managers should incorporate environmental performance into employee objectives, leadership development programmes and operational decision-making processes. Creating a culture where environmental responsibility is viewed as everyone's responsibility would strengthen organisational legitimacy while supporting long-term strategic goals.

8. Conclusion

British Airways' organisational culture is complex, historically rooted, and evolving. While its strong role culture supports safety and reliability, its hierarchical and bureaucratic tendencies hinder agility, innovation, and employee engagement. External pressures: political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental are driving BA toward a more hybrid culture that balances operational discipline with innovation, customer-centricity, and sustainability (Deloitte, 2024; IATA, 2023). To thrive in a volatile global environment, BA must continue to reshape its culture, strengthen employee relations, and embed collaborative, innovative practices across the organisation (British Airways, 2023). With strategic cultural alignment, BA can enhance performance, rebuild trust, and secure long-term competitive advantage in the decades ahead (Schein, 2010; McKinsey, 2023).

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Figure 1: <https://www.logodesignlove.com/british-airways-logo-evolution>

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