

Organisational Culture at British Airways

A Critical Analysis of Structure, Decision-Making and Performance

LCLM 5005 Organisational Culture

BA (Hons) Leadership and Management Skills for the Workplace

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1. Introduction

Mullins and Christy (2016, p. 574) argue that culture is pervasive, shaping 'how things are done around here' and exerting significant effect on decision-making, structural design, group behaviour, motivation and management control. This report tests that argument against British Airways (BA), whose culture is unusually visible because so often publicly contested.

BA became a subsidiary of International Airlines Group (IAG) on 21 January 2011, when the holding company was created through its merger with Iberia (Centre for Aviation, 2011). It employs more than 41,000 people and in 2025 earned operating profit before exceptional items of £2,230m on revenue of £14,679m (British Airways, 2025; IAG, 2026).

The report argues that BA's prevailing culture is a role culture in Handy's (2020) terms, underpinned by assumptions rooted in engineering, safety and state-owned hierarchy and reinforced by a functional structure. That culture acted for four decades as a barrier to effective functioning, most visibly in industrial relations, and only since 2020 has it begun to become an enabler, incompletely and contingently.

2. How Culture Shapes BA's Structure and Decision-Making

Mullins and Christy (2016) contend that culture is a major determinant of structure, the two intersecting in pursuit of organisational objectives. BA illustrates this in both directions.

2.1 Structural form

BA sits within a two-tier arrangement. IAG operates a multidivisional holding structure, described in its own terms as 'a light structure at the centre' with 'agile, empowered' operating companies (IAG, 2025). BA itself is organised functionally: its Management Committee divides by specialism rather than market or geography, covering operations, commercial, planning, technical, digital, finance, customer, legal and safety (British Airways, 2026a).

This functional design corresponds to Handy's (1978, 2020) role culture, which Mullins and Christy (2016) summarise as resting on strong functional pillars, with the role more important than the individual and position the main source of power. In an airline these pillars are unusually rigid because externally licensed, making functional identity durable.

Culture and structure are mutually reinforcing rather than sequentially causal. An assumption that safety comes through procedural compliance produces a mechanistic structure of high specialisation and formalisation (Mullins and Christy, 2016), which socialises new entrants

into procedural thinking: culture shaping behaviour beyond formal control systems (O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell, 1991).

2.2 Decision-making

Three characteristics follow. First, decision rights are centralised at the apex: Sean Doyle has combined the roles of Chief Executive and Chairman since April 2021 (McKinsey & Company, 2024), a power-culture element within a role culture.

Second, capital decisions are long-cycle and irreversible. The £7bn transformation programme, roughly half committed to new aircraft, exemplifies Deal and Kennedy's (1982) bet-your-company culture, in which large-stake decisions are proved right or wrong only much later.

Third, and in tension with this, operational decision-making is proceduralised and risk-averse: Deal and Kennedy's process culture, with low risk, slow feedback and more concern for method than result. No defect in a safety-critical industry, this becomes one applied to commercial questions, where responsiveness matters more than conformity.

The 2003 Heathrow dispute demonstrates that misapplication. When BA introduced automated time recording for 2,500 customer service staff, some 500 walked out without union endorsement, cancelling or diverting more than 500 flights (Eurofound, 2003). The technology already ran elsewhere in BA; the grievance was lost control over shift-swapping among a group nearly three-quarters female. A systems upgrade was received as a withdrawal of trust: Caring contradicted by an assumption that consent was unnecessary.

3. Identifying the Prevailing Culture

No single model captures an organisation of BA's complexity, and as Cacciattolo (2014) observes, each framework foregrounds different features. Cameron and Quinn's (2006) competing values framework is not used here because its quadrants describe orientation rather than mechanisms of power.

3.1 Schein's three levels

Schein (1985, 2016) distinguishes artefacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions, arguing culture is the hardest element to change.

BA's **artefacts** are among the most deliberately curated in British commerce: the Union Flag livery, the Speedbird motif, the 'To Fly. To Serve.' crest, the Concorde inheritance, and a uniform encoding rank and seniority. Its **espoused values** are Excellence, Caring and Open-minded, underpinned by an ethos of being 'safe and secure in everything we do' and a

purpose to 'connect Britain with the world and the world with Britain' (British Airways, 2025, 2026b).

The productive analysis lies in the gap between these and the third level. BA's **basic underlying assumptions**, inferred from behaviour under pressure, are that safety and technical integrity are non-negotiable; that labour is a cost rather than a partner; and that flag-carrier status confers legitimacy that need not be re-earned. Figure 1 sets these out.

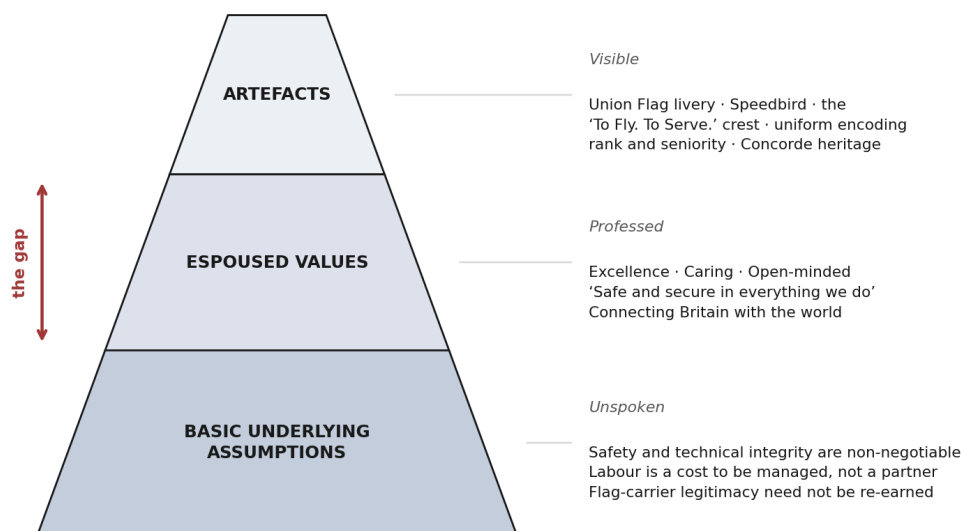


Figure 1. Schein's three levels of culture applied to British Airways. Sources: British Airways (2025; 2026b); author's analysis.

The second is the most consequential, and 2020 exposed it. BA proposed cutting up to 12,000 of 42,000 jobs, writing to Unite that absent agreement it would dismiss all employees and re-engage 'a proportion of them ... under new terms and conditions' (House of Commons Transport Committee, 2020, para 66). The Committee, noting BA's 2019 profit after tax of £1.1bn and £2.6bn cash, concluded that its behaviour and its parent's towards employees was 'a national disgrace' (para 80).

Schein's model explains why Caring did not restrain this conduct: espoused values are professed, assumptions operate below conscious deliberation, and when they conflict assumptions prevail. This is R. Johnson's (2013) point that unless the ethos is addressed, change is superficial.

3.2 Handy's four types

The prevailing culture is a **role culture** on Handy's (1978, 2020) criteria: bureaucratic logic, strong functional pillars, procedural co-ordination, position as the main source of power. Three qualifications matter. A **power culture** persists at the apex in the combined Chair and

Chief Executive role, and **task culture** in the transformation programme's cross-functional teams. A **person culture** operates among pilots, whose licensed expertise and organisation through BALPA give them autonomy management can constrain only by negotiation; their narrow rejection of a pay restructuring proposal in April 2026 shows the limits of hierarchical authority (RTÉ, 2026). BA therefore contains subcultures typically defined, as Mullins and Christy (2016) note, by departmental designation.

3.3 Johnson and Scholes' cultural web

The Cultural Web (Johnson, 1992; Johnson and Scholes, 1993) surfaces taken-for-granted assumptions across six elements, and is the most useful diagnostic here because it links culture directly to strategic blockage.

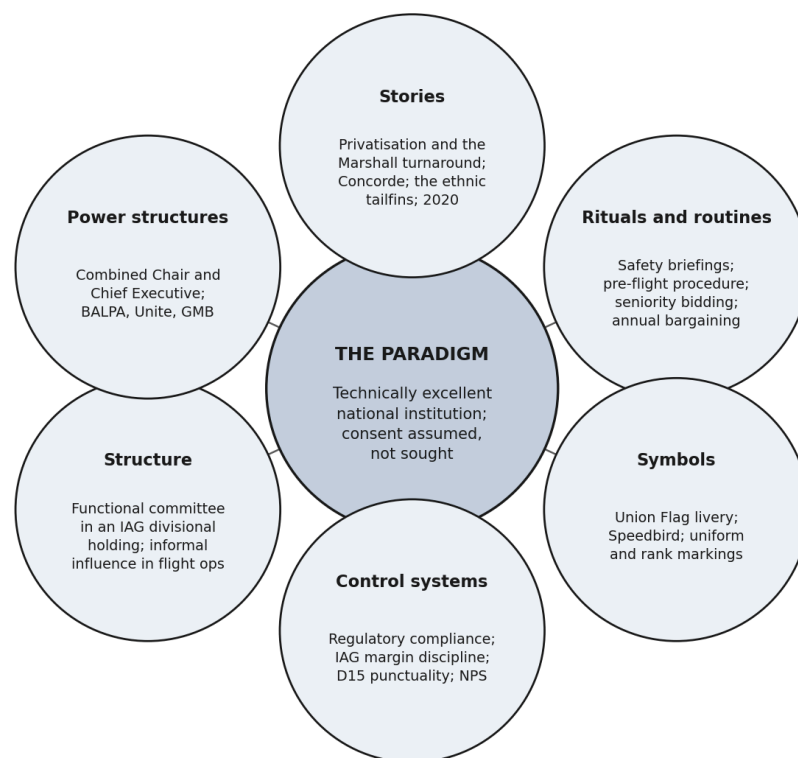


Figure 2. The cultural web at British Airways, after Johnson (1992). Sources: as cited in text; author's analysis.

The web reveals a paradigm of a technically excellent, procedurally governed national institution in which cost control is legitimate, hierarchy natural and consent assumed rather than sought. Because power is distributed rather than monopolised, unions holding real veto capacity, change imposed unilaterally through control systems will be resisted.

3.4 Waisfisz and the multinational dimension

Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) describe national rather than organisational culture, and BA's high power distance and uncertainty avoidance against low UK norms show occupational and regulatory context overriding national culture. Waisfisz's (2015) organisational model is the better instrument. On its six core dimensions BA presents as means- rather than goal-oriented, internally rather than externally driven, strict rather than easygoing, professional rather than local, relatively closed, and work- rather than employee-oriented. The transformation programme targets the second and sixth without disturbing the strictness safety requires, which is difficult because the dimensions are not independent.

The multinational dimension matters: IAG employed 75,786 people at the end of 2025, principally in the UK, Spain and Ireland (IAG, 2026), each with distinct employment law and union traditions, the complexity Mullins and Christy (2016) identify in managing diverse nationalities into a coherent culture. IAG preserves separate brands and labour agreements rather than imposing coherence, though Alvesson (2013) cautions against assuming espoused empowerment describes practice.

4. Leveraging Culture to Adapt to the External Environment

Mullins and Christy (2016) argue that a dynamic environment requires a structure and culture that are sensitive and readily adaptable. Table 1 sets out a PESTEL reading of BA's environment, in which the environmental factors are most structurally serious.

Table 1. PESTEL analysis of British Airways' external environment.

Factor	Principal pressures on British Airways
Political	Heathrow slot allocation and third-runway politics; bilateral air service agreements; parliamentary scrutiny, including the 2020 censure
Economic	Fuel price and currency exposure; interest rates; elasticity of premium leisure and corporate demand
Social	Hybrid working reducing business travel; changing expectations of employment; scrutiny of corporate conduct
Technological	Legacy systems modernisation; AI in operational planning; digital channels; cyber resilience
Environmental	Decarbonisation obligations; sustainable aviation fuel supply and cost; noise and air quality at Heathrow
Legal	GDPR, evidenced by the £20m ICO penalty; consumer compensation rules; post-Brexit ownership and control

BA's response can be assessed against the traits framework of involvement, consistency, adaptability and mission (Denison, 1990; Denison and Mishra, 1995). On **mission** BA is strong: its purpose has operational substance through BA Better World, launched in 2021, with net zero committed by 2050 (British Airways, 2025).

On **adaptability** the record is improving from a low base. The 2017 Heathrow IT failure, caused by an engineer disconnecting a power supply, cancelled 726 flights and cost an estimated £80m (Business Traveller, 2017); the 2018 breach affecting 429,612 individuals drew a £20m penalty, reduced from a proposed £183.39m (ICO, 2020). Both were failures of resilience in a technology estate culture had treated as a cost centre. The £7bn programme is the correction, with over 1,200 projects completed by end-2025, though the March 2025 Heathrow power outage and its 700-plus cancellations show resilience to external shocks remains limited (British Airways, 2026c).

On **involvement** and **consistency** BA is weakest, and Denison and Mishra (1995) associate the first with growth and the second with profitability. Doyle's 'Share, Act, Close the Loop' philosophy attempts to build involvement (McKinsey & Company, 2024), but the evidence is partial: colleague engagement on sustainability stood at 66 per cent in November 2025, a 31-point rise on 2021 but flat against 2024, while perception that BA cares about diversity fell three points (British Airways, 2025).

Culture has not been leveraged for adaptation so much as it has constrained it. Nanayakkara, Wilkinson and Halvitigala (2023) find work organisation reshapes culture as much as culture enables change, and BA has repeatedly pursued adaptation through contractual change, generating resistance that made it slower and costlier.

5. Barrier or Enabler? A Critical Assessment

The evidence supports a qualified conclusion: BA's culture functioned for four decades as a barrier and is now being partially and reversibly converted into an enabler.

5.1 The case for barrier

Mullins and Christy (2016) identify culture as a liability creating barriers to change, diversity and mergers. BA exhibits the first two acutely.

The **barrier to change** is a near-continuous record of contested restructuring. Bob Ayling's Business Efficiency Programme, targeting £1bn of cost reduction from record profitability, precipitated the 1997 disputes, when around 300 crew struck and more than 2,000 reported sick, costing some £125m (Eurofound, 2000). The 2003 walkout cost £40m (Eurofound, 2003), and the 2009 to 2011 cabin crew dispute ran to 22 days of action and an estimated

£150m in lost revenue, with travel concessions rather than pay at its emotional centre (Taylor and Moore, 2019). Mixed Fleet, created in 2010 to staff new Heathrow crew on inferior terms, produced three crew communities who do not fly together and 85 strike days in 2017. Each reflects the same assumption reasserting itself (Figure 3).

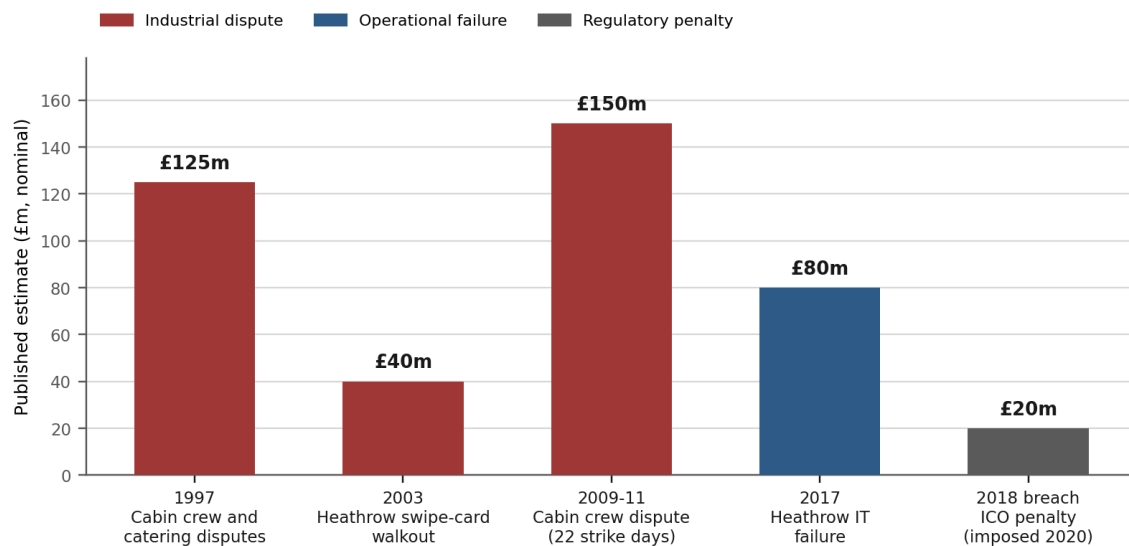


Figure 3. Published cost estimates of selected cultural and operational failures, 1997 to 2020. Nominal figures on differing measurement bases, so indicative rather than directly comparable. Sources: Eurofound (2000; 2003); Taylor and Moore (2019); Business Traveller (2017); ICO (2020).

The **barrier to diversity** appears in outcomes rather than intent. Women held 41.85 per cent of senior roles in 2025 against a 2019 baseline of 38.9 per cent, and ethnic minorities 15.19 per cent against 8.6 per cent (British Airways, 2025). Yet the 2025 gender pay gap stood at 54 per cent mean and 31 per cent median, the median having widened from 27 per cent, falling to 7 per cent mean once flight and cabin crew are excluded (British Airways, 2026d). Occupational segregation between male flight-deck and female cabin roles is the mechanism, and segregation that durable is cultural.

On **mergers**, IAG's preservation of separate brands and labour agreements avoided a frontal clash but deferred rather than resolved it.

5.2 The case for enabler

Three lines of evidence support a more favourable reading. BA's safety culture is a genuine asset: the assumption producing commercial rigidity produces reliability where it counts most. Brand and heritage retain value, as the 2001 reversion to the Union Flag livery recognised. Most substantively, the post-2020 period shows culture beginning to support rather than obstruct performance: departures within 15 minutes reached 82 per cent in 2025 against 73 per cent in 2024, the best since 2011, and Net Promoter Score rose 10.5 points

(British Airways, 2026c). Industrial relations have stabilised, with a 2024 to 2027 agreement for non-banded grades accepted on an 88 per cent GMB vote (GMB, 2025).

5.3 Judgement

The conversion is real but should not be overstated, and Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002) provide the corrective. Examining the Marshall era, they argue BA's celebrated turnaround was over-attributed to culture management and under-attributed to industry conditions, protected routes and structural change. Their scepticism applies now: BA's margin improvement coincides with a strong post-pandemic demand cycle, IAG operating profit rising from €1,247m in 2022 to €5,024m in 2025 (IAG, 2026), and £7bn of capital investment. Figure 4 shows BA's recovery outpacing the group's from a far lower base, its 2025 margin effectively identical to IAG's: what a sector-wide cycle would predict. Culture is a plausible contributing factor rather than a demonstrated cause.

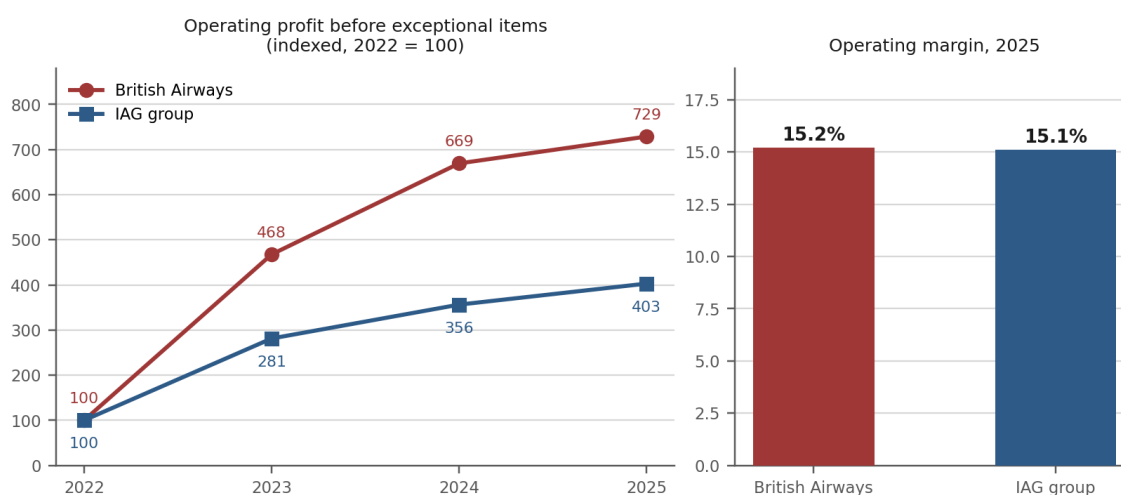


Figure 4. British Airways and IAG operating profit before exceptional items, indexed to 2022, with 2025 operating margins. BA reports in sterling and IAG in euro, so profits are indexed rather than compared directly. Source: IAG (2026).

Two qualifications sustain that judgement. Which? research in February 2026 placed BA fourth of fourteen short-haul carriers and eighth of fifteen long-haul, a recovery from joint bottom of nineteen a year earlier but not the position of a service leader (Which?, 2026); Skytrax ranked BA thirteenth in 2025, unchanged (Skytrax, 2025). The narrow BALPA rejection shows the bargain with the most powerful occupational group remains unsettled. Culture is being converted; it has not been converted.

6. Impact on Performance and Recommendations

6.1 The performance relationship

The literature supports a relationship, though a more conditional one than often claimed. Homburg and Pflesser (2000) find market-oriented culture influences market performance directly and financial performance only indirectly; Zheng, Yang and McLean (2010) find knowledge management fully mediates culture's effect on effectiveness. Gregory et al. (2009) link culture to employee attitudes and Hogan and Coote (2014) to innovation and performance. Bogale and Debela (2024) confirm the association while noting most studies establish correlation, not causation.

BA's own data illustrates a plausible mechanism. It attributes 70 per cent of its Net Promoter Score improvement to operational reliability (British Airways, 2026c), which requires co-ordinated discretionary effort across engineering, ground handling and crew: a cultural output. The converse holds too: the disputes and failures above carry published cost estimates exceeding £400m between 1997 and 2020 (Figure 3).

6.2 Recommendations

One: address the assumption about labour, not its symptoms. BA should move from consultative to co-determinative arrangements on decisions affecting terms and work organisation, extending the 2024 profit-sharing agreement into structured employee representation with real influence. This targets involvement and consistency, its weakest traits.

Two: resolve the Mixed Fleet legacy. Three crew communities on different terms who do not fly together is a structural barrier to a common culture and a standing contradiction of Caring. Convergence would carry a real cost, which BA should model against the recurring cost of dispute, grievance and attrition. This addresses organisational fairness, a pillar of organisational health.

Three: publish a benchmarked organisational health diagnostic. IAG runs such surveys but does not publish scores, and BA discloses only issue-specific indicators. A published diagnostic (McKinsey & Company, 2024) would identify BA's archetype: the analysis above suggests execution edge, since reliability drives advocacy, rather than the market focus its brand history implies. It also creates the accountability Schein (2016) argues change requires.

Four: sequence structural change with cultural change. Work organisation and culture shape each other reciprocally (Nanayakkara, Wilkinson and Halvitigala, 2023), yet BA's

history is one of structural change imposed ahead of cultural readiness. Changes on the scale of the IT modernisation programme should be designed with affected groups from initiation.

Five: institutionalise the listening mechanism. 'Share, Act, Close the Loop' depends on one executive holding both the chair and chief executive roles. Governance that depends on an individual is a preference, not a culture; it should be embedded in management performance frameworks and reported to the board so it survives succession.

7. Conclusion

Mullins and Christy's (2016) proposition holds at British Airways. Culture has shaped a mechanistic structure well suited to safety and poorly suited to responsiveness, and has governed decision-making through assumptions operating below its espoused values. Schein, Handy, Johnson and Scholes, and Waisfisz together identify a role culture with a power-culture apex, occupational subcultures of real bargaining strength, and technical excellence coupled with an instrumental view of labour.

That culture has been more barrier than enabler: four decades of contested restructuring, from the Business Efficiency Programme to the 2020 proposals Parliament called a national disgrace, represent the same assumption reasserting itself. There is credible evidence of conversion since 2020, but Grugulis and Wilkinson's (2002) caution against over-attributing performance to culture management still applies. The recommendations above target the deepest level of Schein's model, the only level at which change is durable.

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