

Colin Marshall

Former BA chairman was instrumental in orchestrating a strategic turnaround that transformed the culture of a moribund state-owned company into a modern privatised business

Lord Marshall of Knightsbridge is best known in the world of aviation as the chief executive and chairman of British Airways who led the transformation of the airline from an inefficient, government-owned company into a successful privatised business.

That period at the helm of BA, which ran for 21 years from 1983 when he was hired by then chairman Lord King to lead the company through privatisation, was as turbulent a period for BA as it was for UK business generally. Fittingly for the leader of such an iconic British company, Colin Marshall, who died aged 78 on the eve of the Farnborough air show, had a profound influence beyond the airline.

For while British Airways today may reasonably fashion itself “the world’s favourite airline”, the carrier Marshall joined was widely derided for subjecting its passengers to something approaching misery. The change did not happen easily, but Marshall proved to be an exceptional choice to realise that transition.

Indeed, Professor Joe Lampel of the Cass business school at City University London credits Marshall with nothing less than bringing to the UK the then-radical idea that attention to customers matters.

While Lord King – armed with excellent political connections, including a close relationship with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – orchestrated the strategic turnaround needed to salvage a moribund state-owned company, Marshall proved to be an excellent choice to manage the necessary next phase of BA’s transformation.

Lampel praises Marshall for his focus on the detailed work of changing BA’s culture, attitudes and working

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SIR MARTIN BROUGHTON
Chairman, BA

routines. And, crucially, he was insightful in recognising that to change the culture of a large organisation is a decade-long challenge.

Marshall recognised, too, that cultural change could not be achieved by management decree. John Strickland, an aviation consultant, enjoyed a long career at BA, which he joined from British Caledonian after that carrier was bought by BA in the late 1980s, and recalls being amazed that even in his first few days with his new employer he should meet the boss, who came to a welcome reception for new employees.

“He told me never to lose my enthusiasm,” says Strickland, who became a facilitator at induction courses for new employees. Marshall, he says, always made a point of attending those courses, even if only by video link.



Marshall embodied the notion of putting people first

Marshall could be ruthless, but former BA Concorde pilot Christopher Orlebar likes the example of Marshall’s reaction when he and a group of colleagues fell asleep after a boozy lunch. Rather than being punished, the group was sent on a “putting people first” course, and attitudes changed immediately. “That,” he says, “was the Marshall magic”.

BA’s trajectory under Marshall was not, of course, smooth, and saw the fractious relationship develop between King, BA and rival Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic. The ensuing “dirty tricks” campaign against Virgin Atlantic sparked a very public row between the airlines and ended up in court with BA the loser.

But Marshall was a great businessman and not just to the benefit of BA. As his successor, Martin Broughton said upon his death: “I have never known anyone better able to juggle a variety of responsibilities.”

To Lampel, Marshall embodied the school of management thought that believes that by getting the operation right, the organisation’s strategy looks after itself.

Lampel notes that banking is a very different industry from airlines, but that its current crisis, which is one of culture, can reasonably be traced to top management’s negligence of its oversight role.

If that is true, then the UK might well wish it had quite a few more business leaders like Marshall. ■

Colin Marshall, 16 November 1933–5 July 2012



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