

## TURBULENT CONTEXTS – THE STORY OF ROME

(Extract form “The Creative Power: Transforming Ourselves, Our Organizations and Our World” { [Link](#) }

To be part of an overseas airline after WWII was to be at the center of major global, cultural and technical change. Global power was shifting from the British Empire and Europe to the United States. The social structure of England was becoming more turbulent as forces for democracy and the demands of the new technology gave more power to the lower classes. The masses needed to be educated to handle the new technologies and women, who had saved the British war effort by working in the factories, could never be satisfied again with the kitchen. I was a beneficiary of this huge shift and was the first of my working class neighborhood to go to a University all paid for by the Liverpool City Council.

In joining one of the two major global airlines of the time BOAC and Pan-American Airlines I was to be a part of the new highway. Just as the railroads had paved the way to extend the industrial revolution, so the Airlines were paving the way for a new vision in which the world would shrink as all countries could be reached in hours instead of days or weeks. The Aviation Industry accelerated the process of development and innovation brought on by the advances made during the War. The management of time became as important as the management of space. Telecommunications the neural network linking this highway would accelerate the introduction of a new and infinitely available resource that would characterize the times as the age of information.

The airlines and the aviation infrastructure of airports, hotels and telecommunication themselves would bring the demands of a new culture of technology wherever they went. There was a correct way to build, fly, maintain, and manage aircraft that would be the same in any culture no

matter who or which class carried out the service or flight operations. All overseas employees found themselves at the center of this confluence and had to find ways to cope and in so doing became co-creators of an emerging new order.

The United States having focused on building large transport aircraft and bombers to support the war effort was able to develop a huge lead in International Aviation. Being less bound by social structures it was also able to take a lead in codifying a new idea demanded by the new technologies, that organization and management of the new complexities mattered we had to learn and teach new ways to organize, lead and manage.

When I joined British Overseas Airways Corporation as a management trainee in 1961 the Corporation very much reflected this confluence of transitions. Its culture was an amalgam of three different cultures. The culture of top management was more like that of the Foreign Office, a diplomatic service. Its flight operations drew more on the military culture and all operational staff wore uniforms. The emerging technical, managerial culture resulting from the introduction of such new disciplines as meteorology, aeronautical engineering, aircraft maintenance, complex demands for communication and logistics to manage ground handling of cargo, mail, and passengers, was not really recognized or valued as something different requiring a different kind of attention or a different kind of management.

The job I trained for was placed at the nexus of that change. Before the war the piston driven aircraft that used to link the strands of the Empire had very short ranges. In 1936 a flight of 1200 miles from Alexandria to Khartoum would involve five stops and take 15 hours. The numerous stops were called stations and each required a Station Officer. Station Officers were responsible for the organization of everything on the ground that affected the aircraft. They were responsible

for calculating the weight and balance of the aircraft and for the preparation of flight plan and weather information. They had to look after passenger accommodation and catering as well as the handling of mail and cargo. They had to be prepared for any eventuality, natural catastrophe, political turmoil, and accidents that could affect service.

In prewar times the job had a romantic connotation as the stations were located in far off places like Karachi, Burma, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and the Seychelles. There would be very few flights to handle plenty of free time to enjoy the local social life with the status and perquisites approaching those of a diplomat

By the 1960's when I joined the airline the technical and managerial component was reaching a critical stage as new and larger jets carried four times as many passengers and made fewer stop. The stations were becoming the complex highly technical multi-agency places they are today. They were becoming centers of corridors of technical innovation, and housed numerous agencies, customs, immigration, health, agriculture, and tourism all of which influenced flight operations and passenger, mail and cargo handling. . Peter Jones one of my fellow trainees has collected many of the stories that reflect the adventure, the humor, and some of the nostalgia for those times and placed them on a website (Jones 2008).

It was for these reasons that BOAC had added a three month management studies program to the end of its two year technical training for Station Offices in the program I attended. The lack of such training and lack of value given to engineering and management was already a factor in the tremendous brain drain from England to the United States that had begun in the fifties. The BOAC training by today's standards was very rudimentary. As I recall it consisted of a rather academic introduction to economics, law and then management. In spite of this the requirement

to write a paper on the effect of organization and management theory, changed my life by introducing me to the literature that was emanating principally from the United States.

At the end of the Station Officer training we were sent to a station for a six months probationary period as proxy managers. We would act as airport managers but the actual manager was there to support us. I was posted to Lima; it was a BOAC station, meaning that it was controlled by staff directly hired by BOAC. Most stations, as we will see later, were controlled by local airlines not BOAC itself.

At the airport, Callao, there was only one flight per day. This meant that there was no time pressure. At most airports aircraft had to be turned around from arrival to departure in 45 minutes. We had 24 hours transit time. It was not surprising, then, that BOAC had never had a single delay since the inauguration of the flight several years earlier. This was tough to face as a neophyte there was no way I could do better, I just had to avoid making a mistake that could cause a delay or give bad service to passengers.

Fortunately, we had an excellent airport manager, an Anglo-Peruvian who had had British military training. He gave me my first practical lessons in control. After every flight he would call a meeting of everyone involved and we would review not only everything that went wrong which was generally very little. He would get us to look at what could have gone wrong. He made us see a causal connection between every element of the flight support systems from passenger reservations, all the way through to passengers eating on the flight and disembarking at the next port of call.

He tied this together with links to the military and British culture with ceremony. As each flight departed he would have all staff line up in order of height and salute off the aircraft. This became

quite an attraction for the local Peruvians and people would come to the airport just to watch the wonderful anachronism of the send off of the BOAC flight. Local airlines would try to imitate the send off but without the background culture of discipline and meaning, their staff was not very committed and it showed in their unpressed uniforms, floppy caps and diffident line up.

This view of management as foreseeing and controlling all the variables that affect performance received another boost when I was introduced to “Methods”. England was beginning to get the message about modern management. An executive from Imperial Chemical Industries, Dr J. Faraday had received some notoriety for his role in introducing “Methods” into the Corporation. BOAC hired him to introduce similar management efficiency into the company. All managers and professionals were to receive Methods training. The training was really an introduction into Scientific Management. It was a sophisticated form of what the airport manager from Lima had taught me. You had to understand how all the variables in a system were connected and you had to design methods to link them in the most efficient way possible.

### An Insight from Rome

*Congratulations, Fiumicino (Rome Airport) has just jumped ahead of Kai-Tak (Hong Kong Airport) and is now first in punctuality and passenger service.*

The telex arrived in September 1967 after only six months of my new posting to Fiumicino, Rome’s International Airport. As Station Officer I still had no power to direct local staff. I had to co-ordinate with the local manager to review and suggest improvements in performance. Any implementation of those suggestions was up to the local manager.

The telex both surprised and perplexed me. BOAC had about eighty overseas agency airports (those not controlled directly by BOAC but by local airlines) and it measured performance every month by recording punctuality and keeping track of the number of positive and negative reports from passengers to provide an indicator of passenger service.

Fiumicino was a very large airport, a transit point for routes going south to Africa, to the Middle and Far-East. Its performance had been consistently modest; it fluctuated around the mid-way mark, fortieth out of eighty stations. I was surprised at the telex because we had managed to improve performance so quickly; I was perplexed because it had taken so little effort in comparison to Trinidad. I fully expected the performance to decline again as it had at Piarco. It did not it stayed in the first three during the rest of my two year stay in Rome.

*How did this happen? What did I do? What did Rome staff do?*

Operating in the background, no doubt, I had an overall impression or sense of direction from the organization literature I had been exposed to as part of BOAC's management training. However, it was the direct experience in Peru and Trinidad that had most conscious impact on how I went about the job.

In Peru there was nowhere to go but down. It was a BOAC controlled station so we could tell our staff what to do. Callao had so few flights that I could be present at each one and intervene directly to avoid error and help improve performance. In Trinidad, as one of the worst performers, there was nowhere to go but up. My strategy of training, systems change, and then personal presence had results but they depended on my being there. Once I left a section performance would drop.

At Rome there were so many flights that I could not possibly use the same approach. I could never see more than one tenth of the flights in any week. I knew not to make the mistake of producing negative reports as a vehicle for change. I knew that I had to develop a relationship with the local manager and have him be a part of anything I wanted to change. I knew that everyone had to be involved. The size of the operations was so much bigger than Trinidad and the 24 hour operation made it impossible to be in touch with everyone on a personal basis.

The first step of my “Methods” plan was to create some vehicle to communicate with everyone, all staff handling BOAC and our Partners flights. I would then go on to carry out a systems analysis which would obviously take a much longer time than in Trinidad. I started a modest newsletter consisting of only one or two sheets. The newsletter reported the statistics of each section’s (traffic, cargo, catering, flight operations, engineering, etc.) performance over the last month. If performance improved I would try to find details of specific actions that had contributed to the performance increase. In order to uncover these stories I went around each of my shifts and asked who had put in a special effort to create the improvements. I put these stories in the newsletter. Soon staff began to respond - when they saw me coming they knew I was looking for something good. I wanted to find what was working well. Traditionally, supervisors and other officers came looking for problems - things that were not working well. If we had a special performance problem I would ask one of the local staff with some artistic talents to produce a cartoon for me illustrating, humorously, the effects produced by the problem. For example, one month, when the rate of mishandled baggage was high, the artist produced a cartoon of a very attractive half naked lady sauntering down the Via Veneto with a sign – “**Better On A Camel**”.

After only one month I was surprised when our performance jumped from fortieth to about eighteenth. In the ensuing months, contrary to my experience in Trinidad, the performance level did not drop. Rome stayed in the top two or three positions of the league for the remainder of my two years posting. Once it became evident that performance was not dropping, that something extraordinary had happened, I began to seek the cause. As part of my systems analysis I began to look at what had changed. I assumed that the staff had found small ways to improve things that together added up to a huge performance increase. Something must have changed in the design or management of the systems of aircraft and passenger handling.

I visited every department, analyzed the systems, and talked with staff from the Senior Duty Officers to the humblest porters, yet in more than a year I could not find any evidence of a change in the system that could be recorded, nothing specifically or concretely had changed. Even when we looked at the more amorphous categories as climate and team spirit we could sense small shifts but nothing dramatic enough to account for the leap in performance and the maintenance of the new level over time.

As I looked for causes the only concrete source of difference I could find was the newsletter. We could not ascribe the difference to personality I had not changed that much since Trinidad. I also knew that if I told my colleagues to start a newsletter, following the same kind of guidelines, they would not necessarily get similar results. I knew of several airports that used such newsletters but they did not achieve high levels of performance. The performance leap had something to do with the situation in Rome, it must have some relationship to the way I went about the work, my attitude, or approach. It also must have something to do with the impact of the newsletter itself. I tried to find what linked all three by talking to other managers. When back in London I contacted people in Management Training but they could not help. One of fellow

trainees Peter Farey had joined the Methods group, he was very interested and gave me more help and resources for methods but nothing seemed to speak to something bigger I sensed was operating.

### *Rewards for Innovation?*

The events in Rome might have been one more step in a fairly conventional and privileged airline career had it not been for another critical incident that complemented and completed the major lesson from Trinidad. The BOAC Area Manager for Italy was based in the city while I was based at the airport. He was used to the airport representative keeping regular office hours. It was very easy for him as Area Manager to call and have someone at the airport to answer his questions. I did not keep regular hours - as a budding scientific management analyst - I had worked out a point system indicating the number of problems and degree of difficulty of each flight and made up a schedule to cover the most points, i.e. the most difficult flights. My hours were different every day, some days I did not work at all in office hours.

Although copies of this schedule were sent routinely to the Area Office, the manager did not pay much attention to it and there was no regular meeting forum where such matters were discussed. The Area Manager was a colonial type with public (private) school education and a reputation for being difficult. I was one of the new graduate in-take of trainees from a redbrick university with a working class background. We clashed over requests for small amounts of money for my unusual and therefore non-budgeted activities - money to fund the newsletter, small prizes and parties to reward the Italian staff for their improvements in performance. I was worried enough about the clashes to ask advice from the older and much wiser senior engineer who seemed to get on well with the Area Manager. His advice was very simple. He said

*Bill, the Area Manager is a bully. He sent the last guy in your job out with an ulcer. You just have to tell him to f... off.*

There was no way I could follow his advice literally but I did interpret it as having to stand up to the Area Manager. This I resolved to do and was just waiting for an opportunity. It came soon enough in the form of a telephone call in which he complained strongly about my not being at the airport for something that was important to him. Without using any of the four letter Anglo-Saxon words recommended by the engineer I did get really angry with him and reminded him of the number of times I submitted my schedule to him, how it was based on a point system allowing me to cover the most difficult flights. I reminded him that this was not convenient for me because I worked different hours every day but it was the most effective use of my time. Then I added the zinger – my job was to make the airport more effective not to be a lackey for him. He was almost apoplectic on the other end of the phone. He immediately scheduled a meeting to discuss the incident. I could tell by his tone and the arrangement he made that this was a critical meeting and would probably be the basis for a negative report to London.

I had read somewhere that when you are really worried about something you should imagine the worst that could possible happen: you should then accept that that is going to happen and then make a list of everything that you can do to make it better. I accepted that a negative report was going to go in. However, the list I made ended up being a list of every single contact I had had with the Manger since my arrival. Every single one was negative from minor affronts, to failure to listen and numerous examples of his unwillingness to support what I was doing in spite of the evidence of results. The final item, for our culture, was quite serious I was in our local agent's office when the Area Manager had called and was openly critical of my not doing my job (i.e. to be there for him)

When I went to his office for the meeting, under the stress of emotion, I had mistaken the time of meeting and was an hour late. Rather than making him angry the lateness seemed to unnerve him a little, he probably thought I had done this on purpose and was going to be a harder nut to crack than he thought. His dark mahogany desk was immaculately clear. He began

*“Now Smith I want to go over our recent incident”.*

He pulled out a single piece of paper from a drawer and began to read. It was a fairly accurate rendering of my angry conversation with him. This was clearly the text that would go into a report to London.

I looked straight back him and acknowledged,

*“Yes that conversation sounded awful, and very angry. But your telephone call was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”*

I then pulled out my three sheets of paper from my BOAC issued brief case and began to read very deliberately the list of each contact I had had with him since arriving at Rome. I noticed him becoming more uncomfortable as the list went on until in the end I didn’t have the heart to read the last one in which he was undermining his own staff to our local agents. He just stood up and said,

*Smith, I certainly see that we have had an awful lot of misunderstanding so let’s go have a coffee and we’ll talk this through.”*

I thought that was the last of the incident but what happened next only confirmed how totally innocent I was of any political awareness or skills. Without sending any official letter to London

the Area Manager was voicing informal concerns about the radical at the airport and the strange goings on there. As a result a team of Traffic Inspectors was sent to examine the airport. Not having any idea of the real reason for the inspection I welcomed the inspectors with open arms. Here at last was a chance to show what I was trying to do and hopefully get some support, if not from the Area Manager at least from London. As they represented the technical system and were equally innocent of the political motivation for the inspection they were quite impressed and I was nominated for a Q for Quality award. The award was part of BOAC's latest general methods campaign that had moved on to Deming's work on Total Quality.

The Area Manager had to give me the award and I have always kept the picture not only for its personal meaning but also for its symbolism. The photograph in Figure 1-1, as well as showing the award for the results I could not explain, also symbolizes the three levels of culture that were in transition, and in play in the Rome situation.

1. I represented the technical control system, which was just beginning to be understood as having different kinds of management needs than the more traditional role or class oriented management system of the British.
2. The Area Manger represented that role-oriented class system which was being pressured by the rapid evolution and complexity of technology, He also represented my complete failure to be aware of the role of influence and politics in management.
3. The picture of the Queen represented the appreciative field, the British culture that itself was under great global pressure to change with the loss of the Colonies and the resistance of newly independent countries such as I experienced in Trinidad. The Q for Quality poster in the background also presaged the important lesson of control, that in the end

results depend on “Me” not “You” The three relationships of A, I and C were there right from the beginning.

**Figure 1-**



**BOAC Award and Three Levels of Organization  
(Close to here)**

The Area Manager was eventually removed from Rome and overseas assignments but not before I had one more culture clash that would result in my decision to leave BOAC and England.

We had a visit from the General Manager for Europe, another of the Colonial types. It was shortly after Fiumicino had become the first airport in punctuality and passenger service. I was

working at the airport and had just come from accompanying a VIP to one of our aircraft when I saw ahead the Area Manger for Rome, talking to the General Manager for Europe. The GM called me over and began to exchange the usual niceties.

*Ah Smith, how are you enjoying Rome? How's the wife?*

The General Manager for Europe asked in his impeccable southern accent. Then after a few more exchanges with the Area manager and myself he asked.-

*Oh Smith, would you step aside a moment, there is something I'd like to say.*

Knowing that the performance results had just been published and Rome had again performed excellently I prepared to answer his questions with all the modesty my bursting pride could muster.

*By the way, Smith, I noticed you didn't call your Area Manger, Sir!"*

I was so taken aback I just blurted out in obvious anger and disappointment:

*Of, course I didn't call him Sir, I know his name. I only call passengers whose name I don't know, Sir!*

The bitterness and strength of my reply surprised even me. I tried to back peddle.

*You have to understand that I am the first age group not to complete military service; I missed it by only thirty days. I have not developed the habit of calling people, Sir.*

Too late, the damage had been done, the reply came,

*I, too, Smith, did not complete military service for medical reasons, but I call my superiors Sir.*

Nothing was said then or later about Rome's performance.

At that time I took a narrow view of the incident and saw it as another part of the class struggle. I couldn't possibly perform any better - and this is the reward. The future does not look good.

Today, as I look at the incident I realize that I was being taught the hard way the second half of my lesson from Trinidad. Designing and doing good work is not enough unless you involve those affected by the work, those below you, those alongside you and those above you. I often wonder if I had had more natural political gifts or if I knew what I know now about power what would have happened in Trinidad and Rome.

However, I did resolve that it was now time to learn more. I would go to the source of most of the new information; a place that valued professional organization and management – America. I researched American Universities and decided to complete an MBA at Indian University because the work of one man James D. Thomson, a sociologist who seemed to be speaking that broader language, that scope beyond technology that my reading and experience embraced . He was even beginning to speak of power. The MBA was a very new idea then and at that time I would be one of only two hundred MBA's in England.

### ***Stumped Again***

In order to complete the story of Rome we have to jump out of our time sequence and take us two years later to my Masters thesis. I was so taken with the sense that something more was

operating than I could see that I made the study of the Station Officer Role and its effect on performance the subject of my thesis.

I wanted to find out from every station officer who held the job (there were more than 100) how in practice they carried out their jobs and whether the differences affected performance. I knew that I had not followed a traditional approach to the job. I hoped to find other Station Officers who had achieved similar success but by different means. BOAC would be able to use the results to improve the design of their training programs and possibly the selection of staff to be Station Officers. I was still operating from the role level assumptions that you could solve all organizational problems by the proper design of jobs and organizations, systems and procedures.

I used the information from experience that you had to look at the Station Officers role the people above him who controlled him and then the people alongside him and the people below him, a full circle of influence, though I did not understand it as such at the time. I constructed questionnaires for the Station Officer and each of the constellation of roles around him - his area manager, who knew both the Station officer and his counterpart the local airline manager - his functional manager, based in London, who knew his technical capabilities - and lastly I constructed a questionnaire for the local airline manager who had to work closely with the Station manager on a daily basis.

The questionnaires attempted to establish two things; -

- ! What were the factors that most contributed to successful performance.
- ! How did the Station Officer actually go about his job?

Measures of performance for each station were already available from published information.

I expected the profile of a successful station officer to come out quite differently from traditional expectations. As the management of the airlines had been drawn from the military after World War II their model unconsciously followed military norms. I expected that the highest level of performance on agency stations on which Station Officers had no command or control would differ considerably from the military model. Using new insights gained from my mentor Thompson I also suspected that each of the key roles the area manager, the functional manager and the Station Officer himself would have different interest and expectation of the Station Officer so would create different profiles for success. Each of them would have a very different view of what constituted Station Officer performance.

It took a major feat of organization on BOAC's behalf to contact and distribute and return questionnaires for the 100 Station Officers scattered around the Globe. As the questionnaires were returned I could hardly wait for the results. I would stay up late at night in the Business School's brand new computing room, punching the data from each questionnaire onto IBM cards. In 1969 computer processing was still quite primitive. My excitement was high as the reams of green-lined computer paper folding into neat piles gave the expectation of profoundly sophisticated scientific results. My first real research! I had all the variables covered from every point of view possible, I had the human insight and experience of having carried out the job myself. I had this new found power of the computer to apply any mathematics or statistical process to my data. How could I fail?

I processed the BOAC area managers' questionnaires. The area managers' questionnaires were to produce a profile of what characteristics and key behaviors they thought most contribute to high performance. I correlated these profiles with information on station performance during that particular Station Officers tour of duty. The results would provide two kinds of data - both how

well the area manager understood what factors affected performance and what those factors were.

I ran the correlation for the area manager's questionnaires. There was no significant correlation!

*O.K. so what do they know anyway? They are the furthest from understanding what the job is.*

I turned to the London questionnaires of the functional Traffic managers. Again there was no significant correlation!

*What is happening - they at least should have some idea!*

With rising anxiety I turned to the local managers' profile,

*They should know. They see the Station Officer in action on a daily basis. Oh no!  
- There is no significant correlation here either!*

Now close to panic, I turned to the last group, the Station Officers themselves.

*They must correlate; they know what it takes to do well. There must be some correlation here. Let me cross my fingers!*

Alas! There was no correlation! My heart sank

*What am I to do? This can't be true! There is no significant correlation at all between any of the profiles and station performance! Did this mean that nobody, not even the Station Officers themselves, really knew what accounts for performance?*

*This can't be.*

I checked and re-checked, but there it was - no correlation!

After a sleepless night thinking of all the costs, the trips around the world, the long burdensome task that headquarter had undertaken to co-ordinate and distribute the questionnaires and their return - all for no result. What could I do? What would I tell them?

The next day, in desperation, I joined all the computer cards together and challenged the computer O.K. you go through this mess and tell me if anything at all correlates with Station performance. The results emerged - a number of seemingly unconnected items from the questionnaires began to give promising correlations. In terms of content, they did not seem to add up to any recognizable theme. Suddenly I noticed that almost all of the responses came from one group of questionnaires - the local airline managers'. There was no pattern relating Station Officer Characteristics to performance but there was a relationship between local airport managers and performance even though the questionnaires were not designed to pull that out. The questions were an accident of the design.

The answer then hit hard and clearly. Of course, it was true that the Station Officers profiles did not correlate with performance. It was not they but the local airline manager who most affected performance. The local airport manager had control of the staff and resources that most affected performance. In practice Station Officers had very little influence on performance.

The implications for Agency policy were enormous. If your goal in sending Station Officers to Agency Stations was to improve performance, as was the case of the three of us sent to the Eastern Caribbean, you were wasting your time. If a Station were performing consistently badly

the most effective route would be to change the agent. This policy was later pursued in the Caribbean. BOAC replaced BWIA as handling agents and hired independent contractors over whom they had more control.

With great luck the research results proved very illuminating and useful to BOAC. However they only increased the enigma of the results from Rome for me. They seemed to confirm the more traditional hypothesis that more direct control correlated more with increased performance. I did not have that kind of control at Rome and I had made a significant difference in performance. The point was further proved by the results after I left Rome, performance returned to the mid-range levels. Was there something different between low levels of performance increase and exceptional levels?

At least the more traditional managers breathed a sigh of relief. The much more expensive direct control of local managers, overall, was more effective than the more indirect but much less expensive influence of expatriate liaison officers. Nothing I could do with the questionnaires revealed any correlation between their characteristics or modes of operation and high performance. I was back at square one. I was little further along. The University had not proved as productive a locale for discovery as I hoped.

In terms of my own quest the research seemed to be telling me that we don't really know what causes of high performance like Rome. In this case of Rome the factors appeared to lie in the properties of the system as a whole and not in the behaviors or characteristics of the individual actors, the Station Officer, local manager, or the higher levels.

