

Boeing: What to do when your employees think you are a monkey?

TEACHING NOTES

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Case Synopsis

By the end of 2019, Boeing was under investigation by the U.S. Congress and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in response to the two aircraft crashes occurred in October 2018 and March 2019 which caused 346 deaths in less than 5 months. These events encouraged these institutions to start an investigation on Boeing procedures and their role on guaranteeing safety. As a result of this investigation, and pursuing transparency, Boeing shared with the assessing institutions various forms of internal information, including employees' conversations between 2013 and 2018. In these conversations, employees express their lack of trust on Boeing 737 MAX as well as in their Senior Management and describe some attitudes and behaviors that go against Boeing's corporate values and culture. In one of the messages, two employees refer to their leaders as clowns and monkeys, which shows the internal conflict between employees and leaders and a negative internal reputation issue. Boeing's current situation is quite complex, as several of its stakeholders both internally and externally have lost trust on the organization. From this, the following question emanated:

How can Boeing face the current crisis? How can the corporate brand reputation internally but also externally be regained?

Timelessness of this case

The Boeing case can be considered timeless due to the abundance of learnings on the process of managerial decision-making during and in response to a crisis that threatens to strongly damage the corporate reputation. The discussion of this case can help us understand how important is to have a strong corporate culture to sustain a good corporate reputation both internally and externally. The lack of coherence between the attitudes and behaviors performed by employees and the communicated organizational values make the organization untrustworthy, which damages Boeing's reputation. This case gives us a clear example of what happens when corporate culture is not nurtured and financial performance is placed above humanity. The disclosed private conversations among employees showing their lack of alignment and distrust to the senior levels can damage the existing relationships with the rest of stakeholders. Therefore, the exploration of alternative courses of action to overcome the crisis is needed. Since this situation can be faced by any type of organization and anytime, this case can be considered timeless.

Learning objectives

The presentation, evaluation, analysis and discussion of the Boeing case pursues the ultimate goal of providing the audience with several learnings. In the following section, these learning objectives have been defined in connection with the relevant literature. The main relevant identified topics are included within the area of corporate

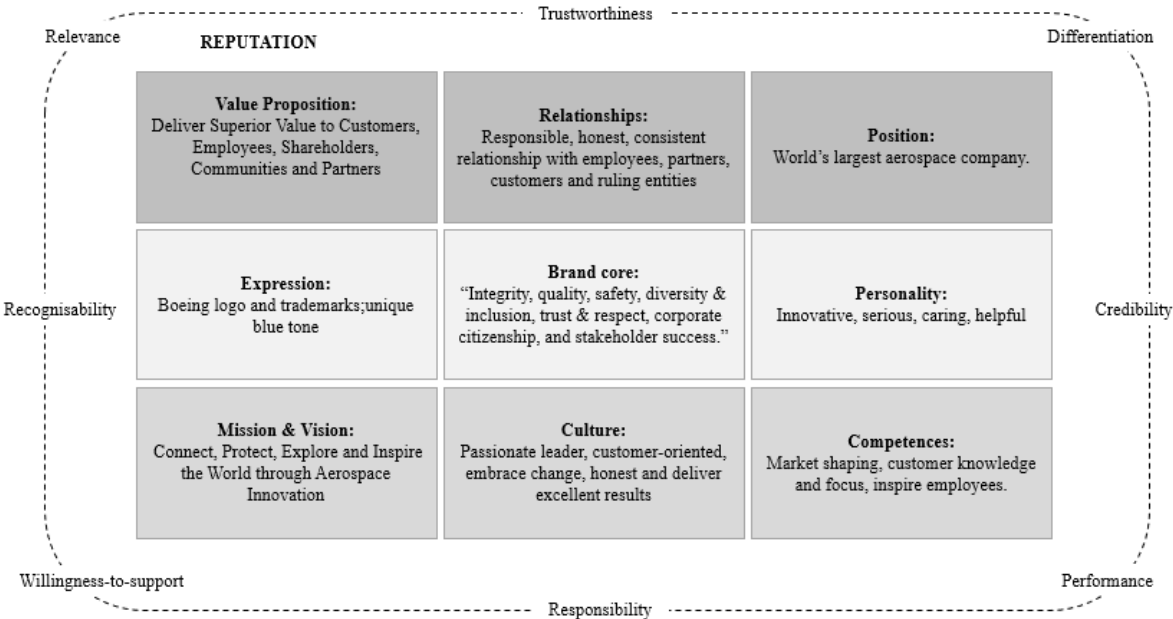
brand identity and reputation, corporate culture, company stakeholders, communication and crisis management. The usage of the presented models aims at understanding the connection between relevant topics and the Boeing case and how they can apply to similar situations. This case has several implications with regards to corporate reputation, with a key focus on the role of internal stakeholders that can serve as a good lesson not only for Boeing, FAA and other industry organizations, but for any company that tries to build a strong corporate brand.

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix

The corporate brand can be defined as the profile that an organization wants to promote among its stakeholders (Kapferer, 2012). It is the organizations' way to set their products or services apart from the competitors', and is formed by several elements, including the functions, differences, personality and core values (Roper & Fill, 2012). Corporate brand stewardship is key, as it is a powerful tool to manage organizational reputation. It allows to communicate the firm's values and mission and allows stakeholders to perceive coherence between the brand personality and its products, services and behaviors. If stakeholders can understand the set of values of an organization, then they are more likely to build trust, as they will perceive less risk. However, one of the key aspects for a brand to be trusted is it being perceived as honest, sensible to consumer needs and dependable (Keller & Aaker 1998). This perception needs to occur both internally and externally, and the failure of either of the perspectives will lead to a lack of employee or customer satisfaction, which will affect the corporate reputation. When trying to tackle such a situation, as in any other managerial decision, it is important to understand the organizational core identity and its surrounding elements as they can be used as a guiding principle (Roper & Fill, 2012). To that end, we can apply the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greiser, 2016). It includes eight key reputational elements to the corporate brand identity matrix to further define and develop corporate brands. The model includes elements such as credibility, trustworthiness and willingness-to-support among others, and helps understand the link between identity and reputational elements. Boeing's CBIRM is shown in **figure 1**.

Figure 1 Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greiser, 2016) applied to Boeing.



Crisis situations can come in many forms and from different sources. For organizations to be able to react wisely, knowledge and understanding of the brand elements is key, and can be achieved by using the CBIRM. Once this is accomplished, organizations can identify potential crisis situations and assess its seriousness based on the link of the crisis to the different brand elements. After identifying and assessing the situation, organizations can define alternative courses of action, choose an adequate one and then, monitor the results (Greiser, 2009). Within this context, and with the help of the CBIRM (**Exhibit 1**) we could identify several critical situations faced by Boeing.

Sources of reputational trouble

Following the categorization proposed by Greiser (2009), the main issue faced by Boeing in this situation is corporate misbehavior; Boeing’s senior management focus on results and cost reduction led to employee bad practices (e.g. misinform clients about Boeing 737 Max characteristics, lack of training support). This corporate misbehavior, which clashes with many of the brand elements of safety and integrity impacted the pilot readiness to utilize the new aircraft, and resulted in two dramatic airplane crashes. As a result, Boeing lost the support by the FAA and many other entities, that grounded the newest Boeing product. All these situations and the disclosure of employee private conversations where critiques about the senior management in the Boeing 737 Max project as well as some confessions about their own misbehavior affect many of the reputational elements. Firstly, the trust by stakeholders (mainly partners, and clients) is damaged since Boeing’s approach to these relationships was not appropriate. Besides, employee misbehavior that has led to risky situations and even death, affect willingness-to-support of stakeholders, because the mission and vision aren’t really reflected in the organizational behavior.

Furthermore, lack of coherence is shown, as Boeing seems to communicate one culture and behave in a contradicting way. Finally, credibility is also questioned, since the brand core values (safety, integrity, quality, trust, respect) have been seriously damaged by these situations. All these aspects, are a reflection of both a vision-culture GAP and an image-culture GAP, as the culture and behavior expressed by the employees, is inconsistent with the vision communicated by the organization and the image of trust and safety associated with Boeing by its stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

Reputation halo effect

It is important to highlight that the era we live in is characterized by large-scale mergers, alliances and complex organizational and industry structures. As detailed by Roper & Fil (2012), the interconnection between various corporate brands results in an association of both entities, which can result in positive or negative issues.

In the Boeing case, the conflict surges from the Boeing 737 MAX project, and associations with this brand could negatively impact the connected entities. In particular, we can identify three different ways in which a negative halo effect could derive from the Boeing 737 MAX project crisis: firstly, internally to other projects within 'Boeing'; secondly, from Boeing to commercial partners such as Air Lion and Ethiopian Airlines; and thirdly, from Boeing to FAA and other regulatory entities.

Boeing's branding strategy is based on the corporate Masterbrand, with its products being named using descriptive or numerical names with the only purpose of identifying the product (see **exhibit 2**). This strategy could allow to show coherence among the diverse businesses of the brand with the central values of the organization and permit to take advantage of the halo effect (Kapferer, 2012). However, it is a double-edge sword, as although it can be beneficial when the positive reputation of one of the divisions can extend to the rest of the organization, in some cases as in the Boeing case, it can lead to the spread of negative reputation across the entire firm.

In this case, the focus of the bad reputation is the product Boeing 737 MAX, and it is extended to the rest of the organization. Now the name of this product is linked to the corporate misbehavior and aircraft crashes. But this halo effect does not only impact internally. The association of Boeing or its 737 Max aircraft with other partners such as Ethiopian Airlines or Air Lion, threatens to spread the negative associations to the airline's brands. That explains Boeing's decision to modify the name of its product in its collaboration with Ryanair, for example (The Guardian, 2019).

But not only client partners can be affected by the halo effect; other entities linked to Boeing and the case can also suffer the consequences of it. The FAA's credibility as a regulatory institution may be damaged after overlooking the safety protocols of the MCAS.

Corporate Culture

Levels of organizational culture

Boeing acknowledged in the statement released on January 9th that their employees' communications did not reflect the company they are and need to be and that were inconsistent with the organizational values (Boeing, 2020). In this declaration, Boeing established what their culture was about, and most importantly, what their culture was not about. From an organizational perspective, culture encompasses the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organization, supported by symbols and rituals (Roper & Fill, 2012). All these dimensions can be grouped into three main levels: artefacts and behaviors (visible) and espoused values and assumptions (under the surface)-, which Schein (1999) identified and explained in the iceberg metaphor. The relevance of this framework lies in the fact that for a corporate culture to be understood and put in place correctly, the three levels should be interrelated (Roper & Fill, 2012).

If the corporate culture is clearly understood and put into action by all members in the organization, it will become a strong culture. The lack of connection among the three layers, however, may lead to a weak corporate culture that translates into inconsistency among employees' beliefs and behavior. In the Boeing case, we notice how the behaviors of some employees, that is the visible level, are inconsistent with the underlying values, beliefs and attitudes that should be shared by all members of the company (see **exhibit 3**). Some employees have alleged that the production of the new aircraft was subject to tight production schedules which led to a cost-cutting culture including the definition of 737 MAX's key selling point: no need for additional training for pilots. This eventually led to two fatal crashes caused by the pilots' lack of information about the MCAS safety software. The fact that Boeing adopted a cutting-corner culture not only contrasts with the organization's core value of integrity, quality and safety but also the decision to use these as the key selling point shows how far from its core Boeing's employees' behaviors are.

Furthermore, we can see an extension of this problem to the whole industry. the FAA admitted their incompetence at regulating the MCAS safety, and although Boeing was the entity not putting safety in place, the FAA failed at identifying possible issues on the software or the safety procedures. As per another employee's comments, there are deep assumptions about the lack capability of some leaders within the organization, and the tightness of certain objectives drove the cutting-corner behaviors. The contrast between the assumptions and espoused values with the observable items of Boeing's culture make it a weak corporate culture.

Four dimensions of organizational culture

Having either a strong or a weak culture has several implications for organizations. A strong culture can help employees understand quickly what is expected from them, while a weak culture can imply higher costs and less efficiency due to the ongoing need to oversee employees. In the Boeing case, it is clear that the existing culture should change in order to mitigate the Image-Vision-Culture GAP. However, it is vital to understand exactly what the nuances of the performed culture are so the necessary changes to achieve the desired culture can be implemented. Goffee

& Jones (1996) defined four types of organizational culture based on two variables: sociability or level of communication among the company members and solidarity, understood as the ability of employees to pursue common goals regardless of personal ties. In Boeing, it is clear that their sociability is very low: despite employees being aware and raising their concerns about the 737 MAX aircraft characteristics and safety, the leadership failed to listen to the warnings and sustained their tight objectives and cost-reduction strategy. Regarding solidarity, even though employees disagreed with the way of doing things and distrusted their leaders or the aircraft, they still committed to deliver the expected results by, for example, selling the aircraft communicating the lack of training as a key value proposition, despite being aware of the safety risks implied. Bearing this in mind, we can consider Boeing a mercenary organization where employees are committed to their tasks but feel little or no loyalty to the organization and its leadership. The lack of loyalty is clearly expressed by one of the employees:

“This airplane is designed by clowns who in turn are supervised by monkeys”

Furthermore, Boeing ratings as employer and staff levels of happiness shown in **exhibit 6** also reflect the lack of loyalty (Comparably, 2020).

Employees as key stakeholders

The corporate reputation chain

The challenge for Boeing in this field is to become a communal organization, where employees are not only driving results but also are loyal to the company. The transformation into a communal firm can bring several positive outcomes to Boeing. One of the main reasons as Davies et al. (2003) explain is that reputation comes from inside the organization. Satisfied employees, especially those in the front line (e.g. sales, client support) provide a better service and communicate the appropriate values to their stakeholders, and customers, who in turn support these values and continue recommending and endorse the brand to others. This process is what makes a corporate brand strong, and helps the brand retain satisfied employees and satisfied loyal customers as well as drive sales, as depicted in **exhibit 4**.

Organizational culture change

The relevance of the employees as a key stakeholder to promote and further company's values is also supported by de Chernatony (2001), who claims that only when employees understand and share the organizational values and are fully conversant with them, can communicate the values and even make decisions about stakeholders without the need of guidance. If they share the company values and communicate them appropriately, the external perspective of the corporate brand will be positively impacted by the employees' attitudes and behaviors (Roper & Fill, 2012). In the case of Boeing, the staff has been performing their tasks against their core values, so the company has expressed the willingness to change in their corporate culture. In order to succeed in this change, it is vital to bear in mind Schein's warnings (1999): firstly, the employee needs to have a clear understanding of the advantages that the

new values will bring offer them, but most importantly, cultural change never has the initiator expected ended result. In Boeing's case, the increase of solidarity via the promotion of idea-sharing and increased social interaction would be required.

Crisis management and communication

Issue management: stakeholder identification

Before even starting to think about their communication strategy, organizations need to understand what types of issues they are facing and which stakeholders will be affected (Roper & Fill, 2012). Once this is clear, a series of communication strategies can be defined so the best one is used depending on the type of issue faced. In order to identify the stakeholders impacted by the issue, the stakeholder categorization suggested by Nutt & Blackoff (1992) can be a helpful approach. Whether the stakeholders are problematic, antagonistic, low-priority or supporters to the organization, will determine the approach the firm should take in communication. In Boeing's case, we can consider that the clients (airlines but also passengers), regulatory bodies (FAA, U.S. Ministries, etc) as well as the media as antagonistic to Boeing, as their view on the issue can impact others and have consequences for the organization and even the whole industry. In reaction to this type of stakeholders, anticipation, counter-argument development and negotiation can be helpful (Nutt & Blackoff, 1992).

Strategic response to issues: Best practices

Once the key stakeholders have been identified and categorized, organizations can develop a strategy to effectively respond to the issue. The response strategy should depend on the level of threat the issue can potentially mean to the organization (Cornelisen, 2008). Furthermore, it would be advisable to follow the six best-practice areas identified by Taylor & Kent (2007), which include: upload traditional tactics to the website; use innovative tactics allowed by the internet such as two-way interaction or real-time monitoring of the issue; reduce uncertainty; inform about the organization's position on the crisis; communicate with different stakeholders and work with the government.

For Boeing, the two fatal crashes meant the grounding of its 737 Max aircraft. This, together with the public release of its employees' conversations which show a systematic culture of misbehavior, can be seen as highly threatening for Boeing's reputation. As trust on the Boeing 737 MAX aircraft diminished dramatically as well as on Boeing's safety protocols, Boeing has undertaken an accommodation and advocacy strategy. Given that employees' behavior does not match the communicated values of the organization, and that the brand image is different to the desired brand identity, it seems clear that an internal change needs to happen in order to align all employees under the same values and behaviors. To that aim, actions against the staff misbehavior have also been taken, as informed by Boeing in their news release in January 2020.

Learning objectives

By studying and discussing the Boeing case, the reader and the audience should achieve several key learning objectives. They have been depicted below using Bloom’s taxonomy.

Verb	Goal	Specific to this case
Remember	the importance of corporate brand stewardship and its connection to brand reputation.	Boeing’s corporate culture inconsistencies and impact on reputation
Understand	the process to identify sources of reputational crisis (understand corporate culture, identify potential items for crisis and their relevance, select course of action and evaluate results.	Practical implementation of the process on Boeing The reason behind the scandals and negative reactions from both stakeholder and public
Interpret	the corporate brand and reputation situation utilizing relevant methods and frameworks	CBIRM, levels of reputational trouble, levels of organisational culture, four dimensions of culture, corporate reputation chain...
Combine	all relevant knowledge about corporate brand management, crisis management and reputation in order to have a deeper understanding of the situation.	Usage of several frameworks and methods. Conclusions drawn based on the combined results.
Evaluate	the way in which the situation has been managed and judge whether it was the best choice and if it would work under different scenarios or for different organisations/industries	The decision and actions that the company take as the response to the scandal
Design	design an action plan to overcome the corporate crisis and measures for the reputational impact.	Design a plan to improve Boeing corporate culture and regain the trust from stakeholders and public

Discussion questions

The presentation and discussion of the Boeing case aims at enabling the audience to learn the identified key learning objectives. In order to support the presenter in its role to guide the discussion, a suggested main question to be used as the starting point for the debate as well as several supporting questions that will ensure the key topics are addressed have been designed and are presented below. However, it is encouraged to adapt them or to include any additional question that may enrich the conversation given the nuances of the audience.

Main question

How can Boeing face the current crisis situation? How can the corporate brand reputation internally but also externally be regained?

Assisting questions

- What are the crisis elements of this case?
- How connected to the brand core are they?
- How critical are they for the reputation of the organisation?
- Who are the relevant stakeholders in this case?
- How did the whole incident affect Boeing's reputation? How can the impact be measured?
- What actions can Boeing undertake to recover its former reputation?
 - How should the corporate culture be addressed?
 - How does the incident affect other product and brands in and outside the organisation?
 - Who should be involved in decision making?
- How to address PR?

Teaching suggestions

The following section provides several suggestions for the teaching of the case. The objective is to deliver the presenters a set of recommendations and tools that will allow them to plan and conduct an interactive, exciting session.

Presentation and introduction

Prior to the discussion session, it is important to understand how it will be handled. The first thing to clarify is the number of presenters that will be leading the discussion, and the role of each on it. If there is only one presenter, they should have a clear understanding of the case, its structure and the main takeaways that could be deducted from it. This will be key to guide the discussion comfortably and smoothly. Instead, if several people will guide the presentation, clear roles should be defined so they do not overlap each other but enhance their colleagues' work. A good option would be that one person introduces the case and presents the facts, another one leads the discussion (although all members should be active in this phase) and a third person can present Boeing's managerial decisions.

Moreover, In order for all participants to be able to actively participate in the discussion, it would be advisable to print or make it accessible online for all of them, some days in advance when possible, so the participants have enough time to review the case facts.

Additionally, it is recommended to make use of media and any other element that will be likely to catch the attention of the audience and add further details to the discussion. In this case, videos showing stakeholder reactions, video or audio communication material or screenshots of social medial messages could be good additional materials. Besides these materials, as well as a PowerPoint presentation supporting the case discussion, it is recommended to use the whiteboard (or any other available surface/screen that can be seen by the whole audience) to highlight the case key points and record the collective ideas and comments. This will help summarize the main ideas and identify possible gaps, not only for the participants but also for the leaders, who should ensure the relevant topics have been covered.

Discussion

This discussion should start by requesting the audience to assume the role of the board of Boeing. Since several stakeholders are implied, it would also be interesting to divide the participants in different groups, each of them assuming a different role: one group could be the CEO, another could be the employees, a third group could be the clients (airlines, passengers) and another could be the ruling authorities (FAA, governments). Although the case focuses on Boeing and mainly their decisions should be discussed, requesting the audience to adopt one specific role may help them think as the assigned stakeholder and the resulting comments may provide with a wider perspective.

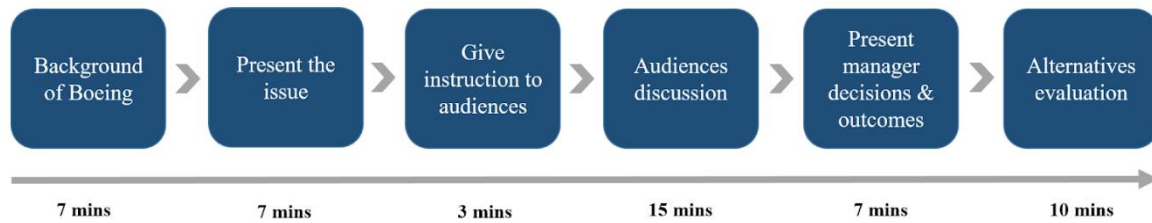
It is important to remember that the role of the presenter or presenter is to facilitate the discussion, present the main facts and summarize the group comments on a visible surface. It is their task to ensure the discussion is open, dynamic and that the main topics are covered, but it is important to note that the audience should draw the conclusions and make connections, and the facilitator should only give support or help arranging the ideas.

Conclusion

Once the discussion has finished, the facilitator can present the managerial decisions taken by the organization and add any comments that may be found of relevance. If the participants of the discussion failed to mention a key topic, for example, it is advisable that the presenter acknowledges it. Ideally, all the learning objectives should be met, and the identified main learnings should be addressed.

Time Plan

In order to achieve learning goals in this case, a careful time plan is necessary. A time plan is a useful tool which enables the presenters to manage time and control the process of the case solving session. The exhibit below describes our detailed plan on how we distribute an estimated time for each phase of the session. The total amount of time is around 45 minutes. The session will start with presenting the background and issue of Boeing company. After that, several questions will be asked as a starting



point of the discussion, which will take place in the following phase. In this step, the presenter(s) needs to control the time effectively, so the later part will not have to be rushed. After the discussion, the manager's decision will be revealed as well as the outcomes. Finally, the different solutions raised from the previous analysis will be evaluated, and lessons from the case could be addressed at the end of the session.

Reflection

As part of the BUSN35 course in Corporate Brand Management and Reputation at Lund University, students were requested to write a management decision case which could be considered as a source of learning for students and other organizations. This case had to be presented in a lecture and be used as the basis for an in-depth discussion on managerial decisions in response to crisis or difficult situations. Students would form 3 member groups and would try to identify several real-life examples of companies undertaking managerial decisions that could be considered evergreen. After supervision with the course coordinator Mats Urde the students would focus on the most interesting case out of their earlier selection based on its relevance, underlying learnings and suitability for the assignment.

In order to tackle this task, the group organized several meetings throughout the duration of the course to establish the priorities, divide tasks and define timelines to ensure a smooth working process and the delivery of a high-quality course presentation and dissection in a timely manner.

This case proved to be very interesting due to its complexity, and it will be possible to add more events and details to it as time goes by. The 737 issue has been lasting for more than one year since the first aircraft crash, but as the internal employee conversations show, the culture issues have been faced by Boeing for years now, and it will still take long until they are solved.

The Boeing case feels like a melting pot with the best ingredients for a case session on corporate branding and reputation: there are dramatical accidents, issues with trust both from inside and outside the company, relationships between brands at an industry level and internal changes. While gathering all the information and trying to connect the different situations and decisions with the available tools and frameworks, we feel that we learnt much on the field. This case has helped us have a deeper connection with the corporate brand reputation tools and frameworks, and this will help us face similar real-life situations if they come.

One of the most challenging parts of the development of the case was to think about it from the lecture perspective. As students, our approach has always been to solve the case rather than describe the facts without taking any positions. We have worked hard to ensure we provided an objective explanation of the facts, and that each of the relevant aspects could be related to a specific learning outcome for the session. We found it very interesting to step into the shoes of the professor.

To end with, we would like to acknowledge how working on this case has contributed to the enhancement of some of our skills such as teamwork, writing, information collection and synthesis and identification of key aspects when looking at a company issue. We strongly believe that these learnings will be a helpful tool in our real-life professional experiences.

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Appendix

Exhibit 1 CBIRM (Urde & Greiser, 2016)

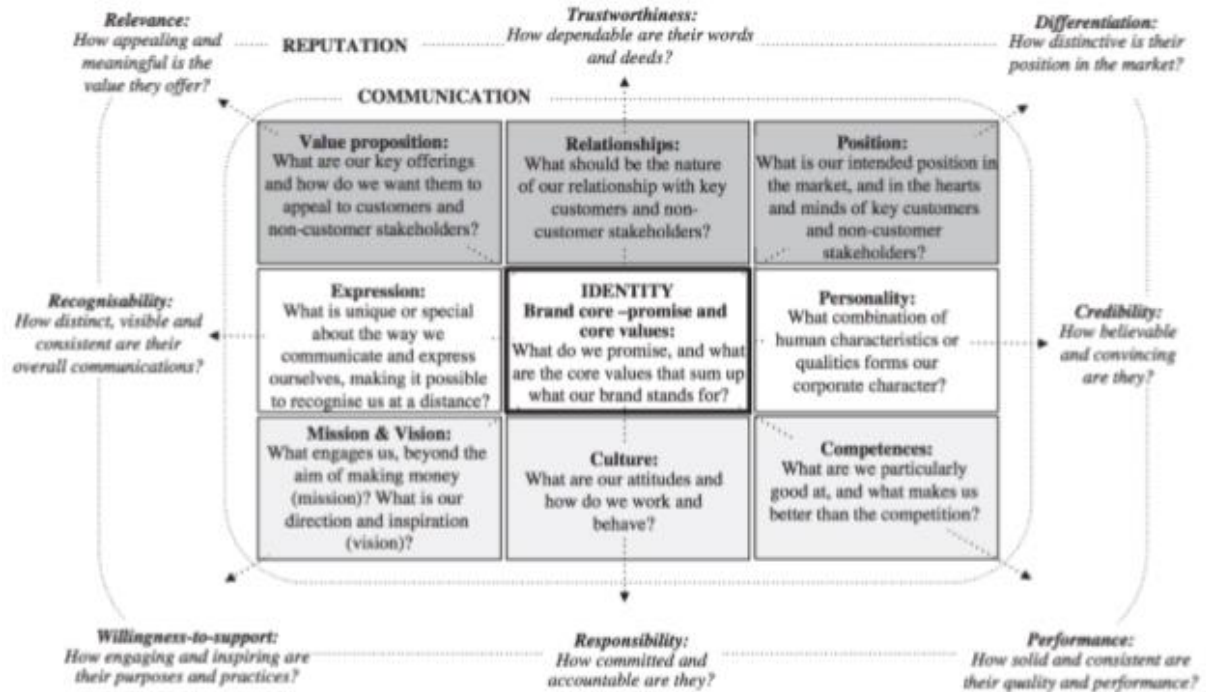


Exhibit 2 Boeing Product and Services names, retrieved from Boeing website.



Exhibit 3 Levels of organizational culture (Schein, 1999) applied to Boeing

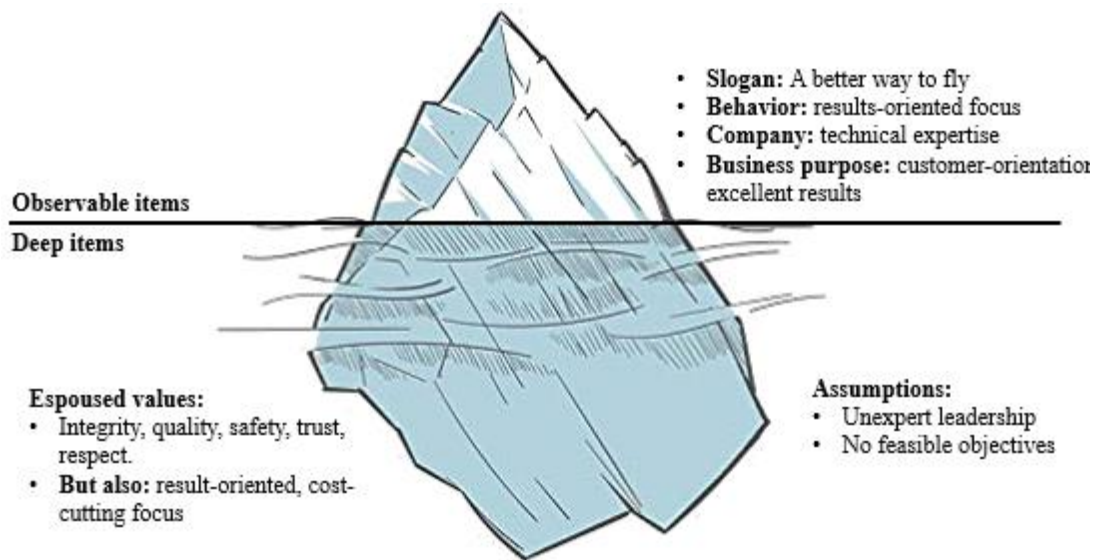


Exhibit 4 The corporate reputation chain (Davies et al., 2003)

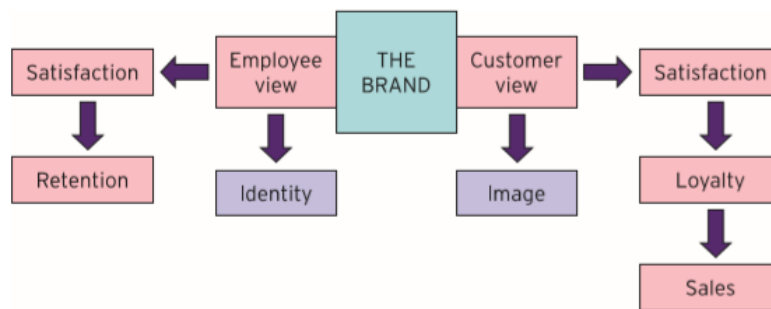


Exhibit 5 The four dimensions of culture (Goffee & Jones, 1996)

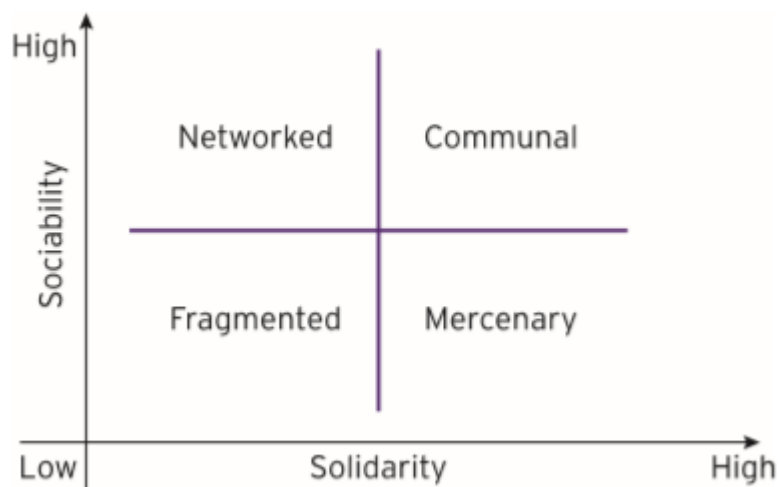


Exhibit 6 Boeing employer brand ratings (Comparably, 2020)

Boeing Employer Brand

71% of employees are proud to be part of the Boeing brand while 58% of employees believe they work in a positive work environment. Boeing's Employer Brand is comprised of a C- rating for Retention, a C- rating for Office Culture, and a C+ rating for Happiness. Employer Branding is an important aspect for companies looking to obtain and retain talent.

