

Review Article

Evaluation of organizational ethics in terms of businesses: The case of Virgin Atlantic Airways and British Airways

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ethics, which examines the values relating to good and evil and right and wrong, has always occurred and been discussed at any time of human life from past to present. Especially after the industrial revolution, which is deemed as the beginning of globalization and industrialization, ethics has started to be a benefit for businesses with the establishment of more professional businesses. In this sense, top-level businesses of today that act within the scope of organizational ethics adopt universal moral values. In this study, a case study is carried out within the framework of a different view, using the literature review method on the dirty tricks campaign of Virgin Atlantic Airways and British Airways in relation to the universal ethical values that support organizational ethics, processes in ethical decision making and the application of organizational ethics. As a result of the case study, it was concluded that it was true to bring organizational ethical principles and rules to the forefront and act ethically by Virgin Atlantic Airways. It is concluded that British Airways harms its organizational image and completely ignores organizational ethics by acting contrary to it and not applying organizational ethical values and principles. In this context, this study aimed to emphasize the ongoing importance of organizational ethics in every stage of business life cycle and to determine the ways of the benefits obtained in businesses in which organizational ethics are applied. This study also aimed to provide theoretical benefits to businesses on organizational ethics.

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1. Introduction

*“It is our choice of good or evil that determines our
character, not our opinion about good or evil”*

Aristotle

The concept of ethics, whose known history dates back to the ancient philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, began to become more of an issue mainly during the Renaissance period with Bacon, Descartes, and Spinoza. The turning point of ethics was with the studies of Kant [1, 2]. We find that most philosophers generally focus on ethical action. Kant, on the other hand, looks at the principle behind the action [3, 1]. The concept of "good", especially regarded as a positive value, occupies an important place in Kant's ethics. In this case, Kant aimed to discover and determine the highest principle of morality [3, 1, 2, 4].

In this context, the concept of ethics extending from the ancient age to the present still maintains its place and importance in life even when the first quarter of the 21st century ends [5]. It will probably continue to maintain its importance until the extinction of humanity. Essentially, this importance of ethics is due to the necessity of human beings as social beings and living in society. According to some researchers, ethics, which originated from values and moral elements of the society, is described as tradition, personality, and behavior in the conceptual framework [6, 7]. In this case, ethics are shaped by determined contexts [8-10].

Ethical definitions are not only valid for individuals, but also for society, groups, and businesses [8-10]. There have been several changes in the competitive fields of businesses, especially with the effect of globalization, which has accelerated since the 1970s. While the most important of these areas of competition were the economic factors at the beginning, this situation started to include more moral elements such as organizational ethics in time [11; 12, 13].

One of the most well-known examples of organizational ethics among rival airlines is the case of Virgin Atlantic Airways and British Airways (BA) [14]. Of these two airlines, Virgin Atlantic has competed with BA for many years since its establishment. BA who wanted to win this competition started a smear campaign called dirty tricks against Virgin Atlantic [15]. This campaign consisted of making bad propaganda about Virgin Atlantic's services, image, reputation, and financial situation by disgracing Virgin Atlantic in front of its customers and the public [16-18, 19].

In this study, the case of Virgin Atlantic and BA was examined as a case study within the context of organizational ethics, and the results of this case were emphasized. Similar to this study, "Virgin Atlantic and British Airways", one of the best-known studies on this case study, conducted in 1996 by Kitson and Campbell, focuses on BA's dirty tricker campaign and the result of BA's unethical behaviour [20]. In addition, in Gregory's book titled "Dirty Tricks: British Airways' Secret War against Virgin Atlantic" in 2000, another study, the unethical process caused by BA from the establishment of Virgin Atlantic to the end of the litigation process has been examined [21].

This study discusses the theoretical aspects of organizational ethics and examines it in a conceptual framework. This study also explains the scope of ethics, universal moral values that support organizational ethics, and organizational processes. In this study, evaluations about organizational ethics are also included, and a case study about Virgin Atlantic and BA is tried to be made from the perspective of organizational ethics. In this context, a literature review was made particularly. As a result of the case study, it is aimed to emphasize the ongoing importance of organizational ethics at every stage of the business life cycle and to determine the ways of the benefits obtained in businesses where organizational ethics are applied. This study is crucial because it is one of the few studies that refer to organizational ethics and ethical values within the framework of a case study with regard to businesses. This study also aims to make it easier for businesses and researchers to understand the benefits and problems that come with ethics and to offer theoretical benefits to businesses on organizational ethics. In this context, in the second part of the study, the concept of ethics and its scope are mentioned. In the third part, the



principles of universal moral values are emphasized. In addition, organizational ethics are examined in the fourth part. In the fifth part, the case study of Virgin Atlantic and BA was examined within the context of organizational ethics, and in the sixth part, which is the last one, the conclusion and discussion part is given.

2. The Concept of Ethics and its Scope

When we look at the etymological roots of ethics, we see that it originated from the Greek word "ethos", which means personality and character. The concept of "ethics", derived from Ethos is described as an intangible phenomenon and emphasizes ideal behaviour [22, 23]. Ethics is a field of philosophy that tells individuals which elements that represent morally good-evil, right-wrong, or ideal-non-ideal should be chosen and deals with how they should act [24, 25]. In other words, ethics questions the concepts of "right-wrong, duty-responsibility, social responsibility" by adding a philosophical perspective to behaviours [26, 27, 28]. In this sense, ethics examines the values of individuals regarding right or wrong and the source of their actions [29, 22, 23, 30, 31]. Ethics changes according to the rules of society, cultural structure, experiences, and even financial views [32].

The terms morality and ethics are used interchangeably by some authors. However, although the two concepts have similar aspects, they are different from each other [23]. The similarity between ethics and morality is due to the fact that morality is included in the area of investigation of ethics and ethics is a moral philosophy [23, 26]. To tell the truth, ethics has created a more philosophical field by being different from the concept and rules of morality [33]. In this direction, ethics has been accepted as a moral philosophy by most sources. Essentially, ethics acts based on judgments about morality [34; 25]. Morality is about individual belief systems. Morality is also a system of values that guides people's preferences and behaviours [35, 36].

Solomon (1992) argues that ethics engages in two key elements. These are; a) what are the traits to be a good person, and b) what should be the rules that determine and limit the behavior of the person [37, 23]. According to ethics, there are many options for acting in moral ways. Ethics plays a role as a tool to evaluate, choose and decide between these different options. In this context, universal values and ethical principles are crucial for making ethical decisions [38]. Virtually, ethics is about putting principles into action [38].

According to some researchers, ethical behavior is not only related to individual ethical values, but also to society and media, various groups, organizations, etc. It is determined through elements [39, 40]. Ethical attitudes and behaviors cannot be built on benefits, gaining advantage, fear of higher power or punishment, and similar reasons [41]. Ethical thoughts, attitudes and behaviors should be independent of these reasons.

Pastin (1986) lists the characteristics of businesses with high ethical standards, namely ethical businesses, as follows [42, 43]: A) They attach importance to the concepts of right and justice. B) In the direction of their main purpose, they carry out their transactions by complying with values and ethical rules [26]. C) They state that they attach importance to the interests of society and customers in the ethical rules they present to the public. These businesses establish good communication with internal and external customers and treat them ethically. Business owners and managers adopt ethical behaviors for businesses. D) Managers act within the framework of their individual responsibilities by adhering to ethical codes and rules in business decisions. It is mentioned in the ethical codes and rules of the businesses that the employees will be held responsible for their decisions [43, 44].

3. Universal Moral Values

Universal moral values are ethical values created primarily to systemize human societies. These principles are essential to establish ethical values first in life and later in organizational structures and maintain the requirements of these values. In this context, first of all, we can list the universal moral values essential for a good life and organizational structures as follows [45, 46, 47]: A) Trustworthiness: To follow a consistent path that stays on the straight and narrow, to fulfill the promises, and be reliable. B) Caring: Giving priority to others and paying attention to them [38]. C) Respect: To be respectful of the opinions, personalities, and personal interests of others. D)



Responsibility: to accept the consequences of any situation or event and pay for the mistakes if necessary. E) Citizenship: To fulfill the requirements of the law, protect social interests, and act according to the environmental consciousness. F) Fairness: it is about protecting the rights equally [45, 38].

Josephson (1996) stated for the first time that there are different universal moral values for organizations through the Aspen Declaration, which he created with the participation and approval of several organizational leaders in 1992 [46, 48, 49]. Josephson (1996) stated that universal moral values stem from three main elements: companies' codes of ethics, global codes of ethics, and business ethics literature [46, 50]. In this context, companies' codes of ethics are related to the generally accepted positive moral values of businesses in the world [50]. Global codes of ethics are related to international ethical rules that support business codes [47]. Finally, the business ethics literature is related to the literature information obtained as a result of the efforts made by academics working on business ethics to suggest different moral principles and theories and to create various universal ethical values [47]. According to Josephson (1996), these mentioned items are efficient sources in the formation of organizational ethics in organizations and are guiding in the formation of organizational principles [46].

Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, in line with ethical principles, scientists began to seek solutions for the uncertain ethical codes within businesses and their uncertain status. In this case, how the organizational structures and managers in these years can resolve the uncertain situations in some ethical codes has begun to gain importance and be discussed [51]. In this context, while Van Wart (1996) and O'Leary (2013) state that ethical codes do not have very specific definitions, they argued that ethical codes are effective on employees' ethical attitudes and behaviors [52, 53, 51].

Organizational ethical values, inspired by the universal moral values that have been clearly set forth and well organized and developed, contribute to the correct ethical behaviors within the organization and the development of organizational success and productivity [54, 53]. If managers attach importance to ethical values and display ethical behaviors within the business, employees can see managers as role models when they are on the horns of an ethical dilemma [55, 56]. In this context, since the ethical values of the organization are a guide for the employees on how to behave when they are on the horns of an ethical dilemma, it is evaluated that these values will decrease the reasons and concerns that prompt the employees to silence [55]. Organizational ethical values are among the efficient factors in the achievement of large enterprises. Organizational ethical values mostly include the value that businesses and employees give to good, right, ideal and similar elements [57, 55].

Sometimes, it may not be in the interests of organizations to act within the scope of universal moral values, but in the long run, organizations will provide various financial benefits by fulfilling ethical values [58, 59]. While acting in line with ethical values in organizations, it is significant for organizations to adopt ethical values and to try to shape the ethical organizational culture, as well as financial gains [58, 59].

4. Organizational Ethics

The first study related to organizational ethics was published in 1987. By the 2000s, organizational ethics became a concept that started to take place more and more in the organizational literature [60]. Organizational ethics is actually a concept that guides the behaviors, is related to the core values of the organization, and makes the organizational standards, procedures, and practices the research subject [60, 61]. In addition, organizational ethics expresses the values of an organization to its employees, other businesses, organizations, and society [62]. According to some authors, organizational ethics is about the relations and interaction of the organization with its internal and external environment, as well as the influence of employees on each other. In this case, organizational ethics is more concerned with managing employees and corporate affairs [60].

Organizational ethics is the ethics adopted by businesses. This type of ethics is interested in how a business reacts ethically to internal or external stimuli. For some researchers, organizational ethics can be expressed as the consensus or common view between the individual and organizational goals of the individuals and groups that



constitute the organization. However, the individual goals of persons and groups within the organization can often be a moot point even from their perspective, or may change within the process. In this case, some researchers advocate that reconciliation between individual and organizational goals cannot be fully formed [63, 26]. Decision-makers on ethics in businesses make ethical decisions within the framework of specific power and authority structures required by their authorities and due to the influence and pressure of their superiors [64].

In order to understand organizational ethics well, it is necessary to understand the importance of some theories in the emergence of organizational ethics [64]. In particular, Trevino's (1986) person-situation interactionist model is interested in explaining and anticipating ethical decision-making behaviors of business employees [65, 66]. This model was actually created based on Kohlberg's (1969) cognitive moral development model [65, 66]. This model is related to the cognitive moral development level of the individual and is effective in his idea that something is right or wrong. This model is important to resolve managers' opinions on ethical dilemmas [66]. Kohlberg's model examines the strong influence of leaders, power groups, rules, and laws on the ethical decisions, attitudes and actions of employees from an organizational perspective [65, 64]. Rest's (1986) rational and deliberative four-stage model, another theory, is about the comprehension of the individual whether the problems they encounter in relation to situations and events are ethical or unethical. He also focused on what is right or wrong according to individuals' own ethical attitudes and ultimately their efficiency in making ethical decisions [67, 68, 64].

Organizational ethics essentially consists of the combination of universal moral values and rules which formed in time [38, 47]. In this respect, subjective judgments are not important within the scope of organizational ethics. Here, generally accepted universal values created from an objective perspective are crucial.

Businesses attaching importance to organizational ethics determine organizational ethical principles and act in the light of these principles. These ethical principles can be institutionalized in various ways. In this direction, commissions can be set up within the business [69, 23]. These commissions create ethical behavior principles for businesses and set some standards. Ethical behaviors in businesses can also be institutionalized in the form of the development of ethical principles [69, 23, 70]. Especially, according to Weber, the inclusion of ethical rules in business policies and management programs is required. It can also be said that ethical behaviors in businesses can be institutionalized through ethical training programs [69, 23, 70]. According to some studies, if the organizational ethics does not remain at the forefront, employee absenteeism, turnover tendency, job satisfaction, and bad behavior increase. In addition, their job motivation, job performance, and trust in the manager decrease [71, 72, 73, 55, 74].

5. Virgin Atlantic Airways and British Airways Case in the Context of Organizational Ethics

Virgin Atlantic, a British company, has concentrated on international flights, primarily to Europe and the USA, rather than national flights since its first establishment in 1984 [75, 20]. This situation discomforted BA, another British company, too much in those years (Kitson, 1996), because BA desired to gain an advantage over other airlines and be unrivaled, especially in international flights [76, 77, 78]. After BA was sold in 1987 as part of the British government's privatization plan, BA expanded by incorporating other airline companies [77, 78]. After this situation, the competition between these two airline companies increased even more.

In the advancing years, especially in the 1990s, BA could not stand the superiority of Virgin Atlantic in long-distance flights, tried to remove it from the airline market and conducted a smear campaign called dirty tricks [20]. Within the scope of this smear campaign, BA's employees impersonated Virgin Atlantic staff and reached Virgin Atlantic customers, saying that the flights were cancelled even though it was not true, and they seized Virgin Atlantic's database. Accordingly, BA planned to use the information in the database to change Virgin Atlantic's routes with alternative flights and cheap flights to destroy the company [15, 79, 80, 81]. BA employees also gave inaccurate information to the public about the private life of Richard Branson, the CEO of Virgin [79, 80].

The negative propaganda carried out by BA against Virgin Atlantic was mainly the result of BA's non-compliance



with the organizational ethical rules. BA misled its employees unethically and conducted a smear campaign by not complying with the basic values and standards of its organization. That negatively influenced the relations and interaction of BA with the internal and external environment within the scope of organizational ethics [60]. BA gave unethical duties to its employees in its smear campaign against Virgin Atlantic. In this case, it is possible to say that BA ignored organizational ethical values. In addition, another issue within the scope of organizational ethics is that employees affect each other ethically and unethically. In his study on groupthink, which has an important place in the international literature, Janis (1983) stated that when a group advocating a certain idea struggles with an opposing group, they may develop delusions that their own group is right and the other group is wrong, at all costs [82]. In this direction, Janis (1983) stated that this group may resort to unethical and illegal behaviors and actions and acknowledge themselves to be right [82, 79]. Accordingly, the fact that BA managers and employees act on a certain group idea and that they do this whole campaign by considering themselves right supports the result of this study.

The organizational ethics in question here are the organizational values that BA displays towards its employees, other businesses, organizations, and society. As to ethics, the issue here is that decision-makers make unethical decisions within the framework of specific power and authority structures required by their jobs and under the influence and pressure of their superiors and have their employees apply them [68].

Particularly, BA's statement that Virgin Atlantic sells tickets to its passengers at higher prices than it should be and BA's predatory pricing practice have been on the agenda [20, 81, 83]. It has also been asserted that BA tampered with the private files of Virgin Atlantic [20, 81]. BA also accessed Virgin Atlantic's passenger information and seized its documents [15]. BA also tried to prove its superiority and advertise in an unethical way by making much propaganda addressed to the public [83]. BA managers and employees acted on a common group think and made all these campaigns and propaganda by acknowledging themselves to be right and in an ethical framework.

Organizational ethics is a concept that represents that some social responsibilities are taken while the business performs the services it undertakes to fulfill to the public [23, 26]. However, BA has misinformed society with its campaign, lost social trust, and failed to fulfill its responsibilities to the public. Businesses that attach importance to organizational ethics determine organizational ethical principles and act in the light of these principles [69]. However, BA has ignored the organizational ethical principles that it has to fulfill due to its traditional structure. A lawsuit was filed against BA in the wake of BA's negative statements and smear campaigns brought about by this competition [20, 81]. Although this case was initially rejected, it was later accepted by the Supreme Court again [84]. After Virgin Atlantic won the case, BA paid damages of GBP 110,000 to Virgin Atlantic and GBP 500,000 to Branson in damages. In addition, BA has issued an apology statement. BA's chairman of the board of directors also resigned [84].

In conclusion, Virgin Atlantic struggled with a reputation crisis unethically carried out in public and in the press by BA in the 1990s, ignoring organizational ethical rules [85, 86]. Branson stated that his plans to expand the company had been plagued with this smear campaign against Virgin Atlantic. This situation was encountered for the first time by Virgin Atlantic during its years of operation [86]. However, BA did everything it could to make Virgin Atlantic look bad and fail, but it could not prevent Virgin Atlantic from being one of the airlines with the highest number of passengers between the USA and Europe in those times. Its main reason arises from BA's disregard for its organizational ethical values and Virgin Atlantic's struggle by prioritizing its ethical values and the passengers' preference for Virgin Atlantic.

Within the framework of this entire campaign, BA acted against organizational ethics. Virgin Atlantic needed to gain strength positively in public to regain customers, develop the brand, and stay in the market [86]. In this case, Virgin Atlantic has developed its organizational identity, which reflects the organization, expresses the direction of the organization, and includes features that reveal the originality of the organization [87, 88, 89]. In addition, it



has improved the organizational image of target groups about the business, their judgments about the organization, and their perception of the organization [90, 89, 91].

As a result of the negative campaigning carried out by BA, it was found unfairly by other organizations and organizations and suffered damage in its internal and external relations. In particular, after a certain time when the facts came to light, society found BA's negative propaganda unjust. It has damaged the image and reputation of BA in the long run [60].

As a result, after BA's libelous words, articles, and similar propaganda about Virgin Atlantic and the negative messages it gave to the public, Virgin Atlantic developed various codes of conduct to get rid of this negative impression [23]. Virgin Atlantic stated that they attached importance to corporate culture, that they wanted to be in an innovative, natural and positive situation, that they were people-oriented, and that they have adopted the principle of respecting the thoughts and behaviors of people, especially their employees, partners and customers, and their promises and that they focused on fulfilling customer expectations, and worked to meet customer expectations, etc. in the resources it published which included business values and ethical principles [83]. In this context, Virgin Atlantic has benefited from these rules to win back its customers, stay in the market and develop the brand. In this case, Virgin Atlantic's managers did what management had to do to create an ethical culture.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Ethics is a field that critically examines the behaviors and actions of individuals, whether they are right or wrong, beneficial or harmful [34, 25]. The significance of the concept of ethics is based on a better analysis of the wrong conditions and events that realize inside and outside the organization that is universally evaluated and passed through an ethical filter. One of the special fields of study of ethics is organizational ethics. Organizational ethics is related to examining and customizing right-wrong or ideal-non-ideal attitudes and situations from an organizational perspective. In other words, organizational ethics is related to the determination of ethical principles for organizing the internal and external relations of the business through management policies [92, 93].

In the Virgin Atlantic and BA case study examined herein, BA's employees exhibited unethical attitudes and behaviors. In such cases, employees may have contradictory opinions about the accuracy or wrongness of something, and in this way, they may experience ethical dilemmas [44]. Principally, When employees see an unlawful attitude or request to carry out unethical orders, they may conflict to speak out or remain silent [44, 42]. The ethical dilemma experienced in this case may lead to employees to act against business ethics and organizational ethical rules. BA employees have also gone against universal moral values and organizational ethical values by following unethical orders with the influence of the management.

The dirty tricks campaign carried out by BA against Virgin Atlantic has disregarded organizational ethical values and tarnished the image of Virgin Atlantic [17, 18]. In this direction, according to some authors, businesses should organize ethical programs to increase employee motivation, job satisfaction, productivity, and so on, to prevent problems that may occur in public relations, and to have a more reliable image of the business [69, 23]. Businesses must fulfill their moral responsibilities towards people from all walks of life, including employees, consumers, suppliers, governments, groups, and communities, that is, by establishing and developing ethical principles and rules [94]. Accordingly, businesses should create a program within the scope of organizational ethics. In this sense, Virgin Atlantic mentioned a program that specifies the values and vision of the business in the resources containing the business values and ethical principles published after the dirty tricks campaign [95]. This program emphasizes the requirement to establish relationships with internal and external stakeholders within the framework of confidence and to comply with ethical rules by employees [96]. Essentially, businesses are affected by the employees and customers, the social values, their sector, and so on, while regulating ethical principles [97, 93]. In this context, the attitudes and behaviors of the employees in the businesses towards each other in terms of ethics and work are regulated through organizational ethical principles [97, 93]. In this case, senior managers, authorized



to create and develop ethical principles, play a crucial role [93].

Unlike BA, businesses should always attach importance to ethical principles and social values [56]. In this sense, businesses should have ethical leaders who eliminate ethical dilemmas, provide an ethical work environment and guide their employees in this manner, without conflicting about right or wrong attitudes and behaviors [44]. As in this case study, if employees do not feel that their managers behave ethically and if they do not think that their organization is an ethical environment, they may not exhibit ethical behavior [98, 55, 84]. Like BA employees, they can take the unethical attitudes of the management as an example and follow their orders [43, 44].

Similar to this study, in the study titled "Virgin Atlantic and British Airways" conducted by Kitson and Campbell in 1996, they focused on the dirty tricker campaign and the result of BA's behavior against organizational ethics [20]. Although the study of Kitson and Campbell has common points with the results of this study, in this study, the focus was on the causes of the events and analyzes were made using a different perspective [20]. In addition, in the book study titled "Dirty Tricks: British Airways' Secret War against Virgin Atlantic" by Gregory in 2000, the unethical process of two rival airlines from the establishment of Virgin Atlantic to the result of the litigation process was examined [21, 86]. While Gregory's study focused on the processes related to the event, this study focused on the causes of the events. In this case, the two studies differ.

As a result, although businesses have various industrial and cultural diversity, the cultural aspect of organizational ethics may have similar characteristics in terms of all businesses. In this direction, businesses and therefore, management and managers can be role models for employees by influencing their attitudes and behaviors, and they can activate protection mechanisms for employees minimizing ethical dilemmas in the organization by determining ethical codes to prevent unethical and unethical behaviors, providing seminars, workshops and training programs and similar ethical trainings, monitoring the behaviors of the employees and checking whether ethical behaviors are exhibited, activating the reward and punishment system, by supporting employees to discuss ethical dilemmas and allowing them to report unethical behavior. It is a correct decision for the business to appoint ethical employees, consultants, and supervisors for these mechanisms [99, 44].

In this study, ethics and organizational ethics are mentioned conceptually. In addition, universal moral values that support organizational ethics and processes in ethical decision-making are referred. Besides that, this study included evaluations of organizational ethics and tried to conduct a case study about Virgin Atlantic and BA from the perspective of organizational ethics. It is thought that through this case study, useful information for the literature is presented by talking about how organizational ethics affects businesses and solution-oriented ideas. In this context, this study desired to present a source to the literature within the framework of a different perspective and to be a guide for future studies. The study is crucial since it is one of the few studies that refers to organizational ethics and ethical values within the framework of a case study for businesses. This study also aims to facilitate for businesses and researchers to understand the ethical benefits and problems and contribute to businesses about organizational ethics in a theoretical sense. In conclusion, examination of the concept of organizational ethics through a single case study and limitation of the study with the information obtained in the literature can be considered among the main limitations. That indicates that more research is required on this subject.

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