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Adaptive and Sustainable Leadership for Event Management

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Learning outcomes

By completing this chapter the reader should be able to:

- Understand the importance of event project management in cross-cultural environments.
- Discuss the how adaptive leadership can benefit event project delivery.
- Discuss how knowledge disciplines, when integrated, can positively impact event leadership.
- Explain challenges that face event management at different scales – from small to giga size event.

Introduction

Event Management, as a field of study, is relatively nascent. Attempts have been made by some scholars to define a workable framework that includes collaboration from different knowledge disciplines or industry services (Getz, 2000). However, as with many other fields of study, research reacts to the phenomena happening in the outside world, and attempts to find the right solution to standardize individuals' and organisations' practice. While we understand the gap between academia and practice, where the latter is always advancing due to actual needs on the ground, we also believe that adopting a proactive approach in research to provide the right solutions and run proper training programs, can help to bridge this gap and provide real value to practice.

The knowledge disciplines engaged in studying event management, ranging from cognitive, social and environmental psychology, sociology and anthropology, are meant to understand the differences between the field's subdivisions (Getz, 2007 & 2012). These disciplines have an important impact on the development of the field. Now, to better understand human behaviour, one needs to employ more than one knowledge disciplines (Murdock, 1971). This means that studying individuals' actions through the lens of anthropology would lead to relying on having generalised characteristics of the supra-individual conducted via anthropological analysis. This proved to be insufficient as it ignores the social and personal effects, and results in having anthropological and sociological mythology that Murdock refers to. Alternatively, relying only on psychology as the field of study provides a better advantage over anthropology and sociology because it focuses on experimental techniques. It puts it in a better position to understand and discover the mechanisms of human behaviour. However, focusing only on the individual as the unit of study and ignoring the environment leads to psychological mythology (Murdock, 1971). Therefore, Murdock argues that both directions need to be followed; discovering the mechanisms of human behaviours and the environmental conditions that surround that. Engaging one discipline at a time would either lead to reductionistic mythology in the case of psychology, because of its narrow focus on the mechanisms only, or cultural/social mythology in the case of anthropology, because it ignores the findings on the mechanisms of human behaviours reached by psychology. Similarly, Getz (2000) calls for establishing the event management research field based on linking aspects from different knowledge disciplines. Furthermore, bridging theory with practice remains the utmost goal of all in the event industry. Hence, providing a mechanism to link both is what we attempt to prevent in here.

The main question we raise in this chapter and attempt to answer is: How we can develop a sustainable and adaptive set of behaviours suitable for planning and implementing events? Accordingly, the focus of the chapter is on human behaviour in event organisation and management. We take the readers on a different journey by introducing a novel approach to events leadership that links aspects from three knowledge disciplines; anthropology, sociology and psychology. Being adaptive and sustainable in leading events of their different types: small to mega-scale, such as football world cups, to giga-scale such as yearly Muslims pilgrimage to Makkah, is what we need, taking into consideration the current challenges during COVID-19 pandemic and how events can be lead in the future. This chapter builds on a case study from the UAE following the phenomenal experience and development of Dubai in the context of event management.

The events industry in the UAE has had a phenomenal annual growth of 25% year on year since 2013 (Zawya.com, 2016), and is testament to the multi-cultural diversity of the country. The events industry has become a competitive business that has yielded many benefits to organisations that deliver successful events as well as contributing to the economy of the country. On the other hand, sustainability is becoming a significant concern within the industry, due to the myriad of activities required to deliver an event, and there continues to be both positive and adverse impacts on communities and cultures (Raj & Musgrave, 2009). The nomenclature of events spans a variety of fields and includes a wide-ranging year-round calendar of sporting, music and entertainment events that require meticulous planning and execution to deliver. The outdoor events industry in the UAE is very much seasonal, due to the harsh climate in the summer months, however, indoor events are held year-round and tend to be managed by specific event management companies depending on the event type, e.g. sporting, music, entertainment etc. In recent times, event organisers in the UAE started targeting mass participation at conferences, music, leisure and shopping events, with Expo 2020 being forecast to be the UAE's biggest ever event (www.government.ae). The events management industry in the UAE is wide-ranging and is seen as a major pillar of the future of the UAE's tourism. There are no prescribed parameters in the practice of event management in the UAE nor the need to have formal qualifications or training. Given that the production of every event is an individual project, many project management competencies and techniques are advantageous when planning and implementing an event.

The project management of an event has different phases from initiation to close out, therefore the event manager will require different management and leadership skills to ensure tasks and responsibilities are completed successfully. Leadership style has a direct impact on event success (Wahab et al., 2014) with the ability to influence others in a way that motivates them to work more cohesively. The majority of the literature on leadership relates to leaders and followers, however, Ali (2009) argues that personality is shaped by culture, where culture is a source of pride, and that the relationship between leaders and followers is reciprocal. Moreover, team cohesiveness demands effective leadership (Wendt et al., 2009) because effective leadership creates positive working conditions in a supportive work environment and encourages successful completion of assigned tasks. Pielichaty et al. (2017) argue that it is impossible to adopt one leadership style in managing events. Accordingly, the need for adaptive leadership is paramount to address challenges. Adaptive leadership was first introduced by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky and described as the act of mobilising a group of individuals to handle tough challenges and emerge triumphant at the end