

By Sven Bossu

# Beyond Continuous Improvement

The pandemic was in a way a great opportunity for many associations to re-visit their value proposal and financial model, often with a focus on survival in uncertain times. It forced organisations to think beyond “continuous improvement” and come up with new ways of engaging with their communities and ensuring financial continuity. In an environment which is in constant flux, keeping that mindset alive could make a big difference in the long term. Below is a story of how AIPC, the international association of convention centres, tries to do this in practice.

The event industry is back in great shape, as we saw when we received the results of the yearly AIPC member survey, which were presented at the annual conference in July. While attendance might be lower, overall revenues are back at 2019 level. However, convention centres have witnessed a shift towards more diverse and innovative event formats, and a growing emphasis on sustainability and

technology integration. Additionally, there’s been a notable increase in client expectations for seamless coordination and customization, requiring venues to adapt our services to meet these evolving needs effectively. So no, we are not back to the 2019 situation: the landscape has completely changed, impacting the full event value chain, including convention centres.

## Understanding changes

This means that – to stay relevant for its community – AIPC needs to fully understand these changes and adapt its value proposal in terms of products and services at a faster pace than in the past.

When we started reflecting, the question was: what needs to be changed and how do we rank the changes needed in terms of priority?

The starting point for us was the mission: to encourage, support and acknowledge excellence when it comes to convention centre management. While at its core this is still correct, we added the notion of world-class standards and the education around it.

Next step was to perform a SWOT analysis, clearly outlining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats linked to the mission. While this seems straightforward, it proved more difficult than expected to be fully aligned with the outcome between the different stakeholders. Just as an example: while we all agreed that member engagement is important to fulfill the mission, when do we consider it a strength? Is that 50%? Or should it be 70%? It might seem trivial, but agreeing on this is very important for the next steps.

The first step was to define a set of key priorities which were clearly linked with the mission and addressed the outcome of the SWOT. At the end, we agreed on 5 key priorities: from strengthening member engagement

to ensuring operational and financial growth.

Next – and this is where clear definitions come in – we agreed on a set of objectives for each of these 5 objectives. The key challenge here was not so much coming up with the objectives but making sure that they were SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. AIPC is a relatively small association with limited resources, so we need to focus on what can be achieved or be creative when it comes to getting more resources. As an example: one of the objectives is around defining and publishing best practices related to sustainability. The knowledge for doing so obviously sits with our members, so a small but dedicated group of sustainability officers was created to work on this, with the practical support of the AIPC team.

Finally, a dashboard was created, allowing to monitor progress made “at a glance” and which is discussed at every board meeting. Here as well, it’s important to agree on definitions (what does “on track” actually mean?)

and that – to paraphrase Keynes – “if facts change, objectives can change”.

## Clear view

All this work has allowed us to have a clear view on where we want to take the association and how we will achieve this and goes way beyond continuous improvement. It was shared with the members at the General Assembly during the Annual Conference and implementation has started.

One key lesson learned: definitions and agreement on these definitions are of key importance and the necessary time should be taken to achieve this, in order to avoid any ambiguity and ensuring focus on delivery.

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