

Sustainable events? Absolutely.

In the second part of our series of focus topics, you will learn more about the control concept (PDCA) and its planning within a management system and about when events can be defined as sustainable.

The purpose of any management system is to enable one's own company to achieve goals in an efficient manner and to improve from year to year. Which instruments make this possible? On the one hand, it is standardized and established processes, organizational structures, documentation and other obligations that are put to the test when optimizing with all relevant processes.

On the other hand, it is about a so-called systematic approach, which serves to continuously improve the performance and the management system itself. According to this concept, the recording and subsequent description and evaluation of an established "actual situation" is the beginning of a self-sustaining and self-controlling process. This ultimately leads to continuous improvement of the process performance - in this case sustainable development.

This system originates from the so-called "deming circle" or "PDCA cycle"¹.



In practice, this means that every topic relevant to the achievement of goals appears on the agenda at least four times in everyday professional life:

- ▶ First, as part of planning and setting goals and actions that will lead to the goals being achieved (**PLAN**): What goals are reasonable and realistic? And what needs to be done to achieve them?
- ▶ Afterwards, during the implementation of the planned measures and during data collection (**DO**): Are all measures running as they were planned?
- ▶ Monitoring, measurement and control over operations and performance results are another station for management consideration (**CHECK**): have we measured and checked everything necessary to determine progress?
- ▶ How should future goals and actions be defined so that continuous improvement is ensured (**ACT**): Have we considered all learning effects?

PLAN - the first step in the right direction

The aim of the first step - **PLAN** - is to translate external and internal demands into concrete goals and a balanced corporate policy.

¹ Out of the Crisis. Deming, W.E. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1982. Statistical Method from the Viewpoint of Quality Control, Shewhart, W.A. Dover Publication, 1986.



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Examples of influencing factors that must be weighed against each other at this point in an event management system include legal and official regulations, requirements and wishes of business partners (clients, suppliers and service providers), participant wishes, civil society trends and expectations, the management system's own demands and standard content.

According to the "language of standards," this interplay of internal and external issues that influence the strategic orientation of a company is defined as the **environment or context**. And all the groups whose influence on, or whose impact by, the company's activities is to be analyzed in the context are so-called **interested groups (stakeholders)**. The following stakeholders bring their own relevant topics onto the agenda:

- ▶ from the inside to the outside: management level, own employees, owners
- ▶ from the outside in: including clients, partners, investors, authorities, participants, suppliers and service providers, as well as society and the media

Identifying opportunities and risks

If the organization knows all the important internal and external issues from context, the **decisive risks and opportunities** are worked out in a further step. They form a solid basis for **goal setting**, both strategically for the entire organization and operationally for individual events or areas of activity.

This approach, which leads from goal setting through stakeholder analysis to the definition of key risks & opportunities, applies both to the level of the company and to the level of each individual event (or type of event). The objectives are derived either from the greatest opportunities, the company itself, the desire to make an individual event as sustainable as possible, or from the fundamental idea of risk avoidance or minimization.

Only when the goals have been set is a decision made on the budget for the necessary measures to achieve them. So much for management theory.

Objective in the practice of the event industry

An understanding of the impact of one's own operations on the environment and society (in the language of ISO 20121 "**sustainability action areas**") is largely already present in the events industry. Many companies are making an effort of their own accord to decide on more sustainable options in execution together with the customers/clients within the framework of the available budget. So far, there has not been a lack of will, but rather a lack of a systematic approach based on an ISO standard that permanently anchors the sustainable approach in the operational business.

Only with a system in place can events be analyzed for the best possible sustainability-relevant solutions. Potential targets are only plausible and credible if they deal with the main impacts: If a festival causes thousands of tons of CO₂ through the travel of visitors to and from the event, the organizers should not limit themselves to providing recycled toilet paper when setting sustainability goals, for example.

Two scenarios can be differentiated in the definition of sustainability goals among event organizers: In the case of company-related targets, the final objective is in the hands of the company itself: Reducing energy consumption in the offices, successively converting the vehicle fleet to hybrid or electric vehicles, introducing the "paperless office," improving employee communication, etc.



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When it comes to defining event-related sustainability goals, other stakeholders - clients, sponsors, investors, suppliers and service providers - usually play a greater role than the event organization itself. The will or the money for this is not always fully available.

It will not always be possible to make events sustainable all around (e.g., because of unapproved budgets). However, some things can be achieved with the following strategic approach:

1. The most important risks and opportunities for improving the sustainability of the event must be identified. For these, the best possible options are prepared for coordination with the client and then discussed - creativity and persuasiveness are crucial here. Different cost scenarios, for example, work well here: they offer a choice and, if necessary, allow compromises to be made on certain items. The event organization takes over the function of the "sustainability advisor", so to speak.
2. An important argument vis-à-vis the client is the credible publicity-effective communication regarding the sustainable character of the event: "Do good and talk about it". A good image of the event, communicated convincingly and skillfully, can work wonders with the funders.

When is an event sustainably planned and organized?

If all possible negative impacts on the environment and society have been mitigated or even prevented by the best possible solutions, one can speak of a sustainably planned event.

A fully sustainable planned event remains the ultimate goal in NVMS. However, the road to this goal may become somewhat longer: This requires sustainable innovative solutions and experience, the event organizer and the willingness of network partners. If the assignment results in restrictions in terms of budget or influence on all sustainability fields, the materiality principle comes into play: management systems set the improvement targets where the greatest effect can be expected or where negative effects could be serious. In this way, the usually limited resources are used in the best possible way.

If the most important effects of an event can be steered into more sustainable paths through targeted management, the event can be considered sustainable from the perspective of the management system, always with the premise of "getting better all the time."

Conclusion

On the way to more sustainability in events, it is important to proceed systematically. The PDCA cycle, which underlies all management systems, offers the opportunity to plan and act in a targeted manner in order to achieve a continuous improvement process in the long term. Cleverly communicated incentives regarding the public image can also encourage clients to "loosen up" money for sustainability. It is not realistic to believe in the perfectly sustainable event - but it makes sense and is certainly possible to work systematically towards it.

In the next part of the publication series, we will highlight operational implementation as a building block of a management system and what that means for the usual business processes involved in running events.

If you can't or don't want to wait for the series publications, feel free to attend our Sustainable Event Management [seminar](#).

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