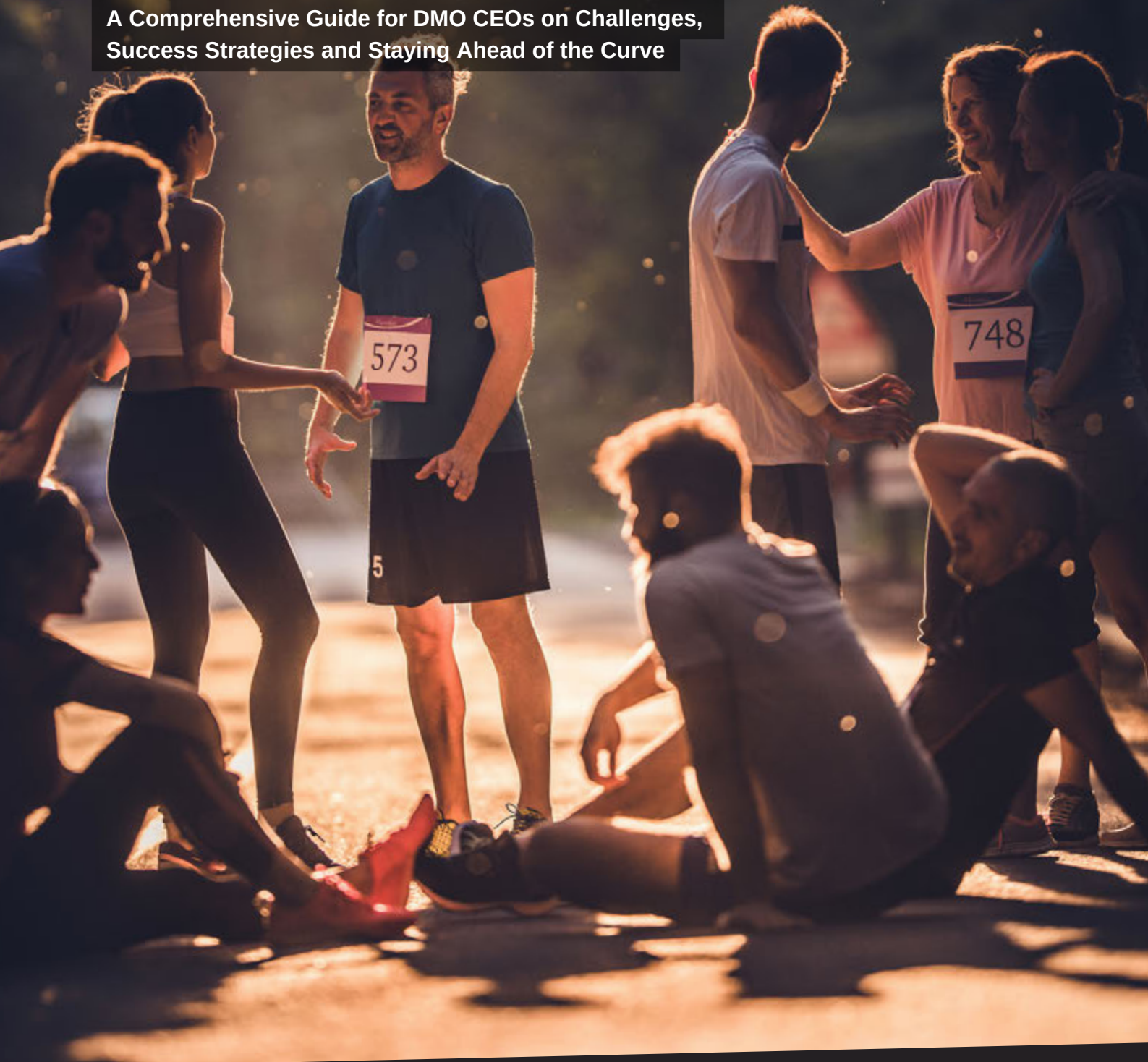


Destination Leadership: Executive Briefing

A Comprehensive Guide for DMO CEOs on Challenges,
Success Strategies and Staying Ahead of the Curve



In partnership with:



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Join the conversation and connect with us on [LinkedIn](#) to stay updated on the latest industry trends, insights, and opportunities. Together, we can drive positive change in the world of sustainable tourism and destination leadership.

Foreword

Dear reader,

Your role as a DMO leader is one marked by unique challenges.

Balancing smart destination marketing with sustainable development requires skillful navigation, especially in an ever-changing landscape with evolving stakeholder expectations.

This briefing is tailored to CEOs who are endeavoring to reshape their DMO's model towards sustainability while achieving enduring organizational success. We explore these leadership challenges and present actionable strategies.

Our insights, drawn from experienced CEOs - Dr. Jens Thraenhart, Brian Mullis and Hjörtur Smárason - offer practical guidance. Throughout, we focus intently on the unique challenges and strategies that you are likely to encounter, for sustainable success.

As a destination leader, you may face political obstacles and resistance, sometimes even from within your own organization. Learn from your peers who have faced and conquered these challenges.

We are proud to produce this executive briefing in partnership with Chameleon Strategies, a UNWTO Affiliate Member. The firm's deep industry knowledge and expertise in destination marketing and tourism strategy development bring added value and relevance to the insights shared here, ensuring they resonate with the real-world challenges you face.



This briefing is crafted specifically for you —the DMO leader charting a course in destination marketing and sustainability, aiming to tackle these complexities with precision and confidence.

Thank you for your dedicated leadership in creating sustainable and regenerative destinations.

Inspired reading!



Dr. Florian Kaefer

Publisher
Sustainability Leaders United
Sustainability-Leaders.com

Got feedback? I'd love to hear from you. Connect with me on [LinkedIn](#) (floriankaefer) or email editor@sustainability-leaders.com.

Executive Summary

Welcome to our briefing on the Leadership Challenges and Success Strategies for Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) CEOs.

In today's rapidly evolving landscape, DMO leaders face multifaceted challenges in steering their organizations towards sustainability and regenerative practices. This brief offers a condensed overview of key insights, strategies, and advice shared by seasoned experts: **Brian Mullis, Hjörtur Smárason, and Dr. Jens Thraenhardt.**

Purpose of the Brief

As a DMO leader, your role is pivotal in shaping the future of your destination. This Brief distills the critical issues, providing a quick and accessible reference. It highlights the challenges you may encounter in balancing sustainability with economic development, building stakeholder support, fostering collaboration, and staying attuned to industry trends.

By dedicating a few minutes to this Brief, you'll gain valuable insights that can help you navigate the dynamic world of destination management more effectively.

Benefits of Reading

- Understand the leadership challenges DMO CEOs face today.
- Discover success strategies to overcome these challenges.
- Learn from experienced industry leaders.
- Stay informed about emerging trends in the tourism sector.
- Find inspiration and practical advice for your role.

We asked our distinguished experts the following questions, which form the basis of this Brief:

1) Navigating Conflicting Interests: As CEOs with a proven track record in leading DMOs toward sustainability, how have you successfully managed conflicting interests and agendas within your organization and with external stakeholders?

2) Building Political Support: What approaches did you employ to secure political support for sustainable and regenerative projects with local and national governments? Especially considering scenarios where you might not have initially had established relationships with political leaders in your role as CEO.

3) Overcoming Political Challenges: When implementing sustainable practices, how did you address political challenges or obstacles in your destination, particularly when faced with resistance from the DMO board or other stakeholders?

4) Effective Communication: What strategies proved effective in communicating the value of sustainability and regeneration initiatives to the DMO board and other stakeholders who may not have fully grasped their significance?

5) Engaging Communities: As former CEOs, how did you foster trust and collaboration with local communities and stakeholders in support of sustainability and regeneration initiatives? Especially in situations where you had not previously established relationships with these groups.

Key Takeaways

Importance of DMOs is growing

Destination development and marketing are increasingly interconnected, meaning that the role of DMOs has become paramount. DMOs are entrusted with the vital task of not only “selling” destinations but also ensuring their sustainable destination management, all while adapting to the evolving expectations of various stakeholders.

DMO leaders have complex responsibilities

The role of DMO leaders extends beyond merely promoting destinations; it encompasses the intricate challenge of harmonizing economic development through tourism with the preservation of environmental and cultural assets. Additionally, they must remain agile in responding to the dynamic needs of stakeholders, both internal and external.

Challenges faced by expat CEOs

When expatriate CEOs are appointed to lead DMOs toward sustainability, they often encounter specific challenges. These obstacles encompass resistance to change entrenched within the organization and the intricate task of securing support from internal stakeholders who may hold deep-rooted attachments to established practices and policies.

Balancing sustainability and economic development

One of the foremost challenges faced by DMOs is the delicate balancing act between sustainability and economic prosperity. While sustainability demands responsible resource management and community engagement, economic growth hinges on the promotion of local entrepreneurship and the fair access to tourism revenue.

Mobilizing internal stakeholders for transformation

Internal resistance to change is one of the primary challenges DMO leaders face when transitioning to more sustainable business models. Building a culture of support for sustainability initiatives within the organization is critical. This involves establishing strong relationships with staff, board members, and other internal stakeholders.

Garnering stakeholder buy-in for sustainability

Engaging with local communities and stakeholders to build trust and collaboration can be challenging for CEOs who do not have established relationships with these groups. Strategies include instituting open-door policies, implementing pilot programs to reduce perceived risks, and leading with the business case for sustainable tourism.

Adapting to macro trends

The future of destination management is influenced by various trends, which DMO leaders must anticipate and address upfront, including: the imperative of sustainability, geopolitical instabilities, changing demographics, AI and the omnipresent lack of skilled workers.

DMO leadership success strategies

Luckily, there are tried and tested success strategies to overcome the challenges outlined in this briefing. Those include building strong internal and external relationships, fostering a culture of sustainability, and embracing innovative approaches to navigate the evolving landscape of destination management.

PART ONE

Leadership Challenges



DMO Leadership Challenges

The role of destination leaders has evolved rapidly over the past few years. While in the past, they focused on promoting the destination and attracting tourists, DMOs now play a more significant role in shaping the destination's identity and managing the tourism experience.

In the current landscape, destination leaders must be more strategic and forward-thinking than ever before. They need to be aware of the latest technological advancements, data analytics, and market trends, and be able to translate these insights into actionable strategies.

Destination leaders also need to be effective communicators and collaborators. They must build strong relationships with stakeholders, including government officials, businesses, and residents, to ensure a coordinated approach to destination management.

DMOs are responsible for promoting a destination to potential visitors and coordinating efforts to enhance its tourism infrastructure. However, DMOs are often complex organisations with political and economic factors influencing their operations.

While CEOs may have the skills and required expertise to successfully lead a DMO toward sustainability and profitability, they may also encounter various challenges that can hinder their efforts. These challenges may include:

1 Resistance to Organizational Change

Many DMOs have established ways of operating and may be resistant to change, particularly if it requires a significant shift in organisational culture or strategic direction.

2 Rejection of Outsider CEO

A successful transition to a sustainable business model requires support from internal stakeholders, including staff and board members. Incoming CEOs - especially expats - may face difficulties implementing new initiatives due to rejection.

3 Balancing Sustainability and Economic Development

Sustainable practices are essential to minimise negative environmental and social impacts. Economic growth through tourism can be achieved by promoting local entrepreneurship and preserving cultural heritage. A successful destination management strategy strikes a harmonious equilibrium between the two.

4 Political & Other Challenges

This typically encompasses navigating complex governmental regulations and policies, managing relationships with various stakeholders including local authorities and community groups, addressing economic fluctuations and tourism industry dynamics, balancing diverse interests and agendas within the organisation, and responding to unforeseen crises or external factors that can impact tourism and destination management.

#1 Resistance to Organizational Change

One of the biggest challenges that DMO leaders may encounter when trying to transform a DMO's business model towards sustainability is internal resistance to change. This resistance can take many forms, from stakeholders who are invested in the status quo to staff who may feel threatened by the proposed changes.

To overcome this resistance, DMO leaders may need to focus on building relationships with internal stakeholders, communicating their vision for the future of the organization, and providing clear and compelling reasons for why sustainability is important for the DMO's long-term success. By creating a shared sense of purpose and engaging staff in the process of change, leaders can help to build momentum for sustainable tourism initiatives and overcome internal resistance.

Jens Thraenhardt believes that change always needs to start at home, at the DMO itself, before going out to the industry and community. At Visit Barbados (Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc.), together with the Director of HR, he aimed to create a culture of respect, inclusivity, and sustainability - through avoiding plastic and promoting local produce during meetings, and by launching an innovative employee engagement program: BTMI Brilliance.

Brian Mullis acknowledges this initial reluctance to accept. He found that going beyond the traditional sustainability approach to reduce the negative impact of tourism was more difficult. To win support, his team commissioned research to build the business case for net positive impact tourism in collaboration with select communities involved in community-led and owned tourism.

Hjörtur Smárason adds that convincing stakeholders that tourism is more than just a source of revenue can be a challenge. So this is a narrative that must be communicated in terms which 'unaware stakeholders' can understand and relate to, including the political class.

Tourism must be communicated as a contributor to a common goal that goes beyond tourism.

“I focused on helping all stakeholders in their areas of need and built trust by always walking my talk and following through on my commitments. Taking advantage of low hanging fruit opportunities at the inception of any new strategic partnership made it relatively easy to build positive momentum and begin to generate tangible results. This eventually led to the co-creation of annual work plans with designated staff in place to manage the relationships and the workflow. ”

Brian Mullis

#2 Rejection of Outsider CEO

Expat CEOs leading DMOs often encounter the challenge of building relationships with diverse stakeholders within the destination, including local tourism operators, government officials, and community members. To address this, successful expat CEOs prioritize relationship-building, fostering collaboration, and gaining insights into the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders.

Drawing from his extensive experience as the CEO of the Guyana Tourism Authority and a strategic advisor to multiple DMO leadership teams, Brian Mullis underscores the significance of nurturing inter-ministerial, multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Jens Thraenhardt adds that it's crucial to remember that political leaders come and go, while stakeholders stay. Therefore, building strong relationships with the local community is essential. Early in his tenure as CEO of Visit Barbados (Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc.), Jens decided to immerse himself in the island's local communities, visiting local shops and restaurants, attending community events, and connecting with its people. He even started a video blog to share his experiences and tell the stories of the people, emphasizing that Barbados was more than just beautiful beaches but a place rich in culture and diversity.

Engaging in community initiatives and supporting local development demonstrates a commitment to the community. By forming alliances and presenting a unified front, it is possible to demonstrate broad-based support for key initiatives and increase the chances of political backing.

“Nothing beats an in-person meeting. Try to meet with all regions you are responsible for. For my first introduction meetings I never went alone, but always with someone who had an established relationship and trust with that person, could brief me on their background, conflicts and concerns, and could make the introduction and build my own credibility. Coming in alone trying to sell yourself makes you look like a “know-it-all” cowboy who is going to rock their boat. Let others sell you in and build your credibility, and then build trust by listening, asking questions and sharing anecdotes from similar challenges you have experienced rather than telling them how to solve their problems.”

Hjörtur Smárason

#3 Balancing Sustainability and Economic Development

DMOs must navigate the tension between promoting economic development through tourism and preserving the natural and cultural resources of the destination. Successful CEOs find ways to balance these competing priorities, by promoting sustainable tourism practices and engaging stakeholders in the development of tourism policies and strategies.

Jens Thraenhardt emphasizes that this balance can also be achieved by actively engaging stakeholders in the process to make them feel part of the solution. He shares his experience of organizing the 2017 Mekong Tourism Forum in the UNESCO Heritage town of Luang Prabang in Lao PDR. Together with the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism of Lao PDR and with support from various donor organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and GIZ, they implemented an innovative approach by making the destination the venue.

This approach involved more than 50 small businesses and showcased small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, it was one of the first conferences in Asia at that time to ban single-use plastic at the event. Local travel operators hosted 90-minute “breakthrough” sessions, and networking lunches took place in several local restaurants.

Despite budget constraints and the lack of a convention center, this innovative approach was recognized by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as one of the most inclusive initiatives in global travel and tourism that year. Not only did it distribute revenues among local stakeholders, but conference attendees also received an immersive experience that encouraged many to return for a future visit. All in all a good example of how to combine economic development with promoting sustainability and inclusivity.

Brian recalls: “I served two terms in the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board under the Obama administration. The Board took the position that sustainability should be integrated into all our policy and strategy recommendations. With that experience in mind, I fostered the integration of sustainability and regenerative messaging and attributes into all aspects of the DMO I led - from its mission, vision and shared values to the national tourism strategy, product development and marketing campaigns.”

For instance, Brian’s team launched a campaign to educate people about the profound benefits of tourism. He also actively sought after renowned sustainable tourism awards, resulting in the destination (Guyana) gaining worldwide recognition for its leadership in this area. This instilled a sense of national pride in the country’s identity as a clean, eco-friendly destination, and it provided an extra push toward advancing sustainability in the tourism sector.

“Since most DMOs have a Board and constituency that expects results on an on-going basis, it’s critical that you take an evidence-based approach to decision making leveraging data and transparently report performance metrics to integrate with budgeting and key performance indicators of the organization and staff. Celebrate successes in order to have everybody feel to be part of the solution.”

Dr. Jens Thraenhardt

#4 Political and Other Challenges

As DMOs embark on their journey toward sustainability, they often encounter multifaceted challenges that extend beyond conventional business operations. In this section, we explore the political and non-political hurdles that DMO leaders must navigate in their pursuit of sustainable destinations.

Political Resistance

Political challenges can pose substantial obstacles to DMO leaders committed to sustainability. These challenges may manifest as conflicting policies, shifting political priorities, or the influence of stakeholders with divergent interests.

Regulatory Barriers

Navigating complex regulatory environments is a fundamental aspect of DMO leadership. Regulations, such as zoning restrictions, environmental laws, and existing legal frameworks, can impede sustainable practices.

Budget Constraints

Sustainability initiatives often demand financial investments, posing a challenge in budget-constrained environments. DMO leaders must balance budget allocation between sustainability projects and other essential functions. This involves identifying and securing external funding sources, grants, or partnerships, and effectively communicating the return on investment (ROI) of sustainability efforts to stakeholders.

Public Perception

Perception plays a pivotal role in the success of sustainability initiatives. DMO leaders may need to actively shape public perception, particularly when faced with initial skepticism or misunderstandings. Strategies encompass effective communication, transparency, and education.

In conclusion, DMO leaders must navigate a dynamic landscape filled with both political and non-political challenges. These diverse hurdles require resilience, creativity, and unwavering dedication to the overarching goal of crafting sustainable and regenerative destinations.

“If leadership at the highest levels isn’t actively pushing a sustainability and regenerative agenda, DMOs must lead this process. This requires aligning with other Ministries’ mandates and priorities, building relationships and trust, and working closely with sister governmental agencies on joint initiatives that create shared value.”

Brian Mullis



PART TWO

Success Strategies

There are several concrete steps that DMO leaders can take to overcome the challenges outlined earlier. Here are some recommendations:

Engage Stakeholders

One of the most important steps a CEO can take is to build relationships with key stakeholders, including board members, staff, local government officials, and community leaders. This can help gain trust and support for ideas and initiatives, and also provide a better understanding of the local context and culture.

Jens Thraenhart underscores the importance of actively involving stakeholders in decision-making processes and activities, from campaigns to conferences. He provides the example of the award-winning Mekong Moments campaign, as well as the follow-up Mekong Mini Movie Festival campaign. In these campaigns, travel businesses ran micro campaigns to encourage patrons to share their experiences in visual formats (photos and videos) on their own social media platforms, tagging content with #MekongMoments and the business's hashtag.

This approach not only generated a substantial content cloud of experiences online from the Mekong Region, inspiring other travelers to visit the destination, but it also generated revenues for the participating businesses.

Fostering connections and networking are valuable skills for leaders, as it is these soft skills that help persuade the right people to transform ideas into actions. Brian Mullis stresses that if leadership at the highest levels isn't actively pushing a sustainability and regenerative agenda complete with the policies and systems for implementing them, DMOs must lead this process.

This requires aligning with other Ministries' mandates and priorities, building relationships and trust, and working closely with sister governmental agencies on joint initiatives that create shared value. The same is true for fostering private-public sector collaboration. In many destinations, there is often a lack of meaningful collaboration between the DMO and the tourism private sector.

“A proactive DMO CEO needs to help evolve the organization from a solely marketing-focused mindset to an integrated approach emphasizing product development, visitor distribution, and community engagement. To fully harness the visitor economy's transformative potential, the DMO CEO needs to lead a shift from mere visitor numbers and overnight stays to a broader understanding of economic impact, seasonal expansion, leakage factors, and balanced growth opportunities that benefit both visitors and residents.”

Dr. Jens Thraenhart

Listen and learn

It is important for any CEO to listen to the concerns and perspectives of staff, board members, and other stakeholders, and to take the time to learn about the organization and its history, as well as the local community and culture.

To shed more light, Hjörtur provides a detailed inside view of his experience balancing the delicate act of managing various expectations while fostering valuable relationships.

Aligning the interests within the organisation is relatively easy, but as always it relies on clear communications and understanding for the goals and direction of the organisation. Inclusion drives understanding - and forgiveness. He identified the following stakeholder groups:

- The board which you answer directly to
- Employees who do all the work and answer all the questions from both the industry and the market
- The industry which is the reason the DMO exists, and whom the DMO is to serve and support and
- Politicians

All of these stakeholders demand a very different type of relationship building and communications, but the basic rule is inclusion.

Communicate clearly

DMO leaders should communicate their vision and goals clearly and regularly to staff, board members, and other stakeholders, and be transparent about their decision-making processes.

Effective communication is essential for CEOs to build relationships, gain buy-in for initiatives, and achieve their goals. Successful CEOs prioritise clear, transparent communication with stakeholders and use a variety of communication channels to reach diverse audiences.

Hjörtur shares valuable feedback in this regard. “Nothing beats an in-person meeting. Try to meet with all regions you are responsible for. For my first introduction meetings I never went alone, but always with someone who had an established relationship and trust with the former. This was done so that he/she could brief me on their background, conflicts and concerns, and could make the introduction and build my own credibility.”

Let others sell you in and build your credibility, and then build trust by listening, asking questions and sharing anecdotes from similar challenges you have experienced rather than telling them how to solve their problems.

Almost every DMO suffers from the feeling by the industry that they are not doing enough, in particular if the marketing budget is small and therefore few campaigns to show for. It is important that all stakeholders feel seen and heard, included, and that CEOs actually listen and take their concerns into account.

Good communications with all those groups means you can refer to conversations you have had with politicians when you are talking to the industry, and vice versa. They understand the importance of the other for their own survival and you being an amplifier strengthens your position.

Prioritise strategically

CEOs should prioritise their initiatives strategically, based on the organisation's goals and resources, and ensure that they align with the values and priorities of key stakeholders.

But the key question is how should a new CEO get the ball rolling in their new job?

We asked Brian to share his experience of developing a support system from scratch. He says, “I focused on helping all stakeholders in their areas of need and built trust by always walking my talk and following through on my commitments. Taking advantage of low hanging fruit opportunities at the inception of any new strategic partnership made it relatively easy to build positive momentum and begin to generate tangible results. This eventually led to the co-creation of annual work plans with designated staff in place to manage the relationships and the workflow.”

Along similar lines, Hjörtur shares how, as the CEO, he managed various stakeholders: “Start with the board that needs to approve directions and that needs to be made aware of direction changes or timeline changes. Nothing should come as a surprise to them. The same goes for the employees. They work in different departments but should all be on board with the direction of the organisation. Any upcoming directional change should be communicated to them first. Neither of these two groups should ever hear about anything from the media first.”

Politicians are an integral part of the setup too, who cannot be ignored. Hjörtur advises that, when it comes to politicians, to give them as much credit as you can. Be careful still that they do not fully own some of the organisation's projects, as that creates the risk of those projects being slaughtered if there is a change in government.

Brian shares how he managed working with politicians - taking the opportunity of being an outsider with no political affiliation as an advantage to showcase that tourism is an apolitical sector and how it has the potential to benefit the community. Such resonating messages help in putting the agenda across to the higher authorities.

Reiterating to stakeholders the strengths of having a well-managed tourism industry is a continuous process. It is also important to remind them that tourism development doesn't happen in isolation. When the agenda is to transform the industry sustainably, convincing stakeholders doesn't happen over a single meeting or a week long training program.

“Thinking far ahead, 7-10 years, and having an ambitious but yet realistic goal is what rallies people behind your direction. You need to have that clear direction and a clear goal, ‘a man on the Moon before the end of the decade’ style mission.”

Hjörtur Smárason

Adapt to the local context

A CEO (especially expats or outsiders) should be adaptable and flexible in their approach, and be willing to adapt their strategies and initiatives based on the local context and culture.

Brian further expands on this idea by sharing his experience from his days as the CEO:

“I’ve been fortunate to work for governments that have progressive state agendas. In my first role within the public sector as a Director of Tourism, three Ministries supported tourism as a viable means for fostering sustainable development. With this level of support in place, I focused on learning formal and informal protocol and building working relationships with sister governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Finance, National Trust, and Bureau of Statistics and with the tourism private sector. The working relationship that was established between the DMO and the national trade association was particularly productive. It only became challenged when politics entered the equation during the election period.”

Convincing Stakeholders to Adopt Sustainability

Engaging with local communities and stakeholders to build trust and collaboration around sustainability and regeneration initiatives, particularly if the CEO did not have established relationships with these groups is a challenge.

Brian shares his strategies that he utilised to win the confidence of his team and other relevant stakeholders about the importance of adopting a new green pathway for tourism:

- Instituting an open-door policy at the beginning of the tenure and focusing on building relationships with key stakeholders on an individual basis by delivering value.
- Building trust and collaboration with communities by implementing pilot programs, to reduce any perceived risk. Pilot programs and demonstration projects appeal to governmental leaders and donors alike.
- Employing a co-creation and design process for the national tourism strategy which involves engaging the broader community of stakeholders to take an instrumental role in defining and supporting the implementation of national, regional, and community-level priorities.
- Leading with and substantiating the business case for sustainable tourism. In a sector that is largely focused on business-as-usual post COVID-19, this has historically been the only way to garner the buy-in and support needed to implement regenerative principles and sustainable tourism strategies.
- Since most DMOs have a Board and constituency that expect results on an ongoing basis, it’s critical to report on performance metrics, based on evidence. This involves defining key performance indicators (KPIs) that align with a DMO’s mission and strategic objectives.

Hjörtur shares his bits of advice on how a DMO CEO can convince stakeholders:

- Thinking far ahead, 7-10 years, and having an ambitious but yet realistic goal is what rallies people behind your direction. You need to have that clear direction and a clear goal, “a man on the Moon before the end of the decade” style mission. One that will get people talking and get them inspired.
- Talk about the community benefits that the sustainable tourism transition can potentially create. Benefits people can relate to and align strongly with their values. In my case in Greenland this was the focus on “Why?”. Why are we developing tourism? That brought us to demographic developments, employment opportunities, education opportunities and the prospect of getting back the young generation that was moving away.
- Find local heroes. Examples of people who have already chosen that direction and the value it has created not just for tourism, but for their own community and the local families.

It is evident from the above suggestions that patience and perseverance are necessary skills to possess for CEOs.

Building relationships

Another critical strategy for overcoming challenges in DMOs is to develop a clear understanding of the organization's culture and dynamics. Incoming CEOs can take the time to learn about the DMO's history, values, and organizational structure, enabling them to navigate complex political and economic factors more effectively. Additionally, building relationships with key stakeholders and understanding their motivations can help incoming CEOs identify areas of common ground and opportunities for collaboration.

To overcome these challenges, expert CEOs may need to employ various strategies, including:

- Building strong relationships with internal stakeholders to gain their buy-in and support for new initiatives.
- Developing a clear and compelling vision for sustainability and profitability that can rally the organization around a shared goal.
- Prioritizing initiatives that can deliver quick wins or generate revenue to build momentum and demonstrate the value of sustainability.
- Collaborating with external partners and stakeholders to leverage additional resources and expertise.
- Communicating effectively with staff, board members, and community partners to build trust and maintain alignment on goals and priorities.

By employing these strategies, DMO leaders can build a foundation for sustainable success and drive positive change in the organization and the destination as a whole.

Invest in Professional Development

As a DMO leader you should continuously invest in your professional development to stay up-to-date with the latest trends and best practices in the industry. You can achieve this through attending conferences, networking events, and other professional development opportunities.

Here are a few examples of sources and tools that can help DMOs and their leaders stay ahead of the curve:

- **Leadership coaching:** A leadership coach can help DMO leaders improve their skills, identify blind spots, and work through personal challenges that may be affecting their leadership.
- **Executive education programs:** Many universities offer executive education programs specifically designed for leaders in the tourism industry.
- **Self-help books:** There are many self-help books on leadership and personal development to turn to for guidance and inspiration. Some popular titles include "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey, "Emotional Intelligence 2.0" by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, and "Daring Greatly" by Brené Brown.
- **Mentoring:** DMO leaders can benefit from having a mentor who can provide guidance, share insights, and offer support.
- **Professional networks:** Joining a professional network can provide DMO leaders with opportunities to connect with peers, share experiences, and learn from each other.

Here are a few websites that could be useful for DMO CEOs interested in sustainability leadership:

Sustainability Leaders United

This website features over 260 interviews with sustainability leaders from around the world, focusing on travel and tourism. A valuable resource for DMO CEOs looking for inspiration and insights into sustainable leadership practices.

<https://sustainability-leaders.com>

Global Sustainable Tourism Council

The GSTC is a global organization that watches over sustainable tourism standards. Its website offers a range of resources for DMO CEOs, including tools for sustainability certification, training and education programs, and information on sustainable tourism standards.

<https://gstcouncil.org>

Chameleon Strategies

Brian Mullis and Hjörtur Smárasson have partnered with Dr. Jens Thraenhardt and a global team of senior executives in the travel and tourism industry at UNWTO Affiliate Member Chameleon Strategies, to offer their unique experience as past expatriate Tourism Board CEOs to DMO executives, boards, and tourism ministers all over the world, with the insights, strategies, and solutions they need to succeed.

www.ChameleonStrategies.com

PART THREE

The Bigger Picture



Trends Impacting Destination Leadership

As destination DMOs continue to evolve and adapt to changing market conditions and visitor preferences, there are a number of factors that impact the role of DMO leadership and CEOs. Here are some of the most important ones to be aware of:

- **Sustainability & Regeneration:** The industry faces increasing pressure to become sustainable and responsible. DMO leaders must be aware of the latest sustainable tourism practices, as well as the potential risks and opportunities associated with sustainability. An increasing number of leading destinations are moving beyond sustaining the status quo to balanced tourism that increases the quality and value of each visitor and delivers a net positive benefit to people, places, and the ecosystems that they depend upon to ensure that host communities and biodiversity flourish.
- **Climate Crisis:** The frequency of climate change-induced weather events is increasingly affecting the quality of the tourism product itself and traveler confidence. This combined with geopolitical instability contributes to future uncertainty. This reality underlies the need for destination leaders to foster collective action among tourism stakeholders to measure and reduce GHG emissions and adequately resource the strengthening of adaptive capacity to climate-induced impacts.
- **Changing Demographics:** As the demographics of travelers change, DMOs must adjust their strategies to remain relevant. For example, the rise of millennial and Gen Z travellers has led to a greater focus on experiential travel, social media marketing, and sustainable tourism practices.
- **Organizational Optimization:** As the focus shifts from destination marketing to comprehensive destination management and development for increased competitiveness, it's crucial to align and optimize an organization's resources. This alignment becomes particularly vital when pursuing inclusive growth, stakeholder engagement, and enhancing the destination's economic, social, and environmental well-being.
- **Digital Transformation:** The digital landscape is continuously evolving, and DMOs must keep up with the latest trends and technologies. Advancements in AI, chatbots, and data analytics are providing new tools for DMO leaders to streamline their work, gain insights, and deliver personalized tourism experiences.
- **Talent Management:** Attracting and retaining top talent is a challenge for DMOs. DMO leaders and CEOs must have strong human resources skills and be able to develop effective talent management strategies.
- **Data-Driven Insights:** AI-powered analytics tools can quickly analyze large amounts of data, providing valuable insights for strategic decision-making. DMOs can use these insights for more targeted marketing campaigns, optimizing visitor experiences, and identifying growth opportunities.
- **Generative AI:** While AI technologies are reshaping the digital landscape, DMO leadership should combine these advancements with a human-centric approach to maintain trust and control for managing destinations effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of CEOs entrusted with steering Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) towards sustainability and profitability is marked by a complex array of challenges. These challenges encompass political resistance, regulatory hurdles, budget constraints, internal opposition, community engagement complexities, shifting public perception, and the unpredictable nature of unforeseen challenges. Acknowledging these multifaceted complexities is the foundational step towards effective leadership.

Effective CEOs recognize the need to build strong and collaborative relationships with internal stakeholders, including board members, staff, and the prevailing organizational culture. They understand that garnering internal support is pivotal to executing sustainable strategies effectively.

Openness, transparency, and clear communication with stakeholders form the bedrock of successful leadership. CEOs ensure that their sustainability initiatives are communicated transparently, forging a shared vision that garners support and commitment from all stakeholders.

Furthermore, a deep understanding of the organization's culture and dynamics is indispensable. CEOs must be attuned to the nuanced fabric of their DMO, recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities it presents. This awareness enables leaders to tailor their strategies to the organization's specific context.

Fostering a culture of sustainability within the DMO is paramount. CEOs lead by example, instilling sustainability as a core value and embedding it into the organization's DNA. Sustainable practices become second nature for staff and stakeholders alike.

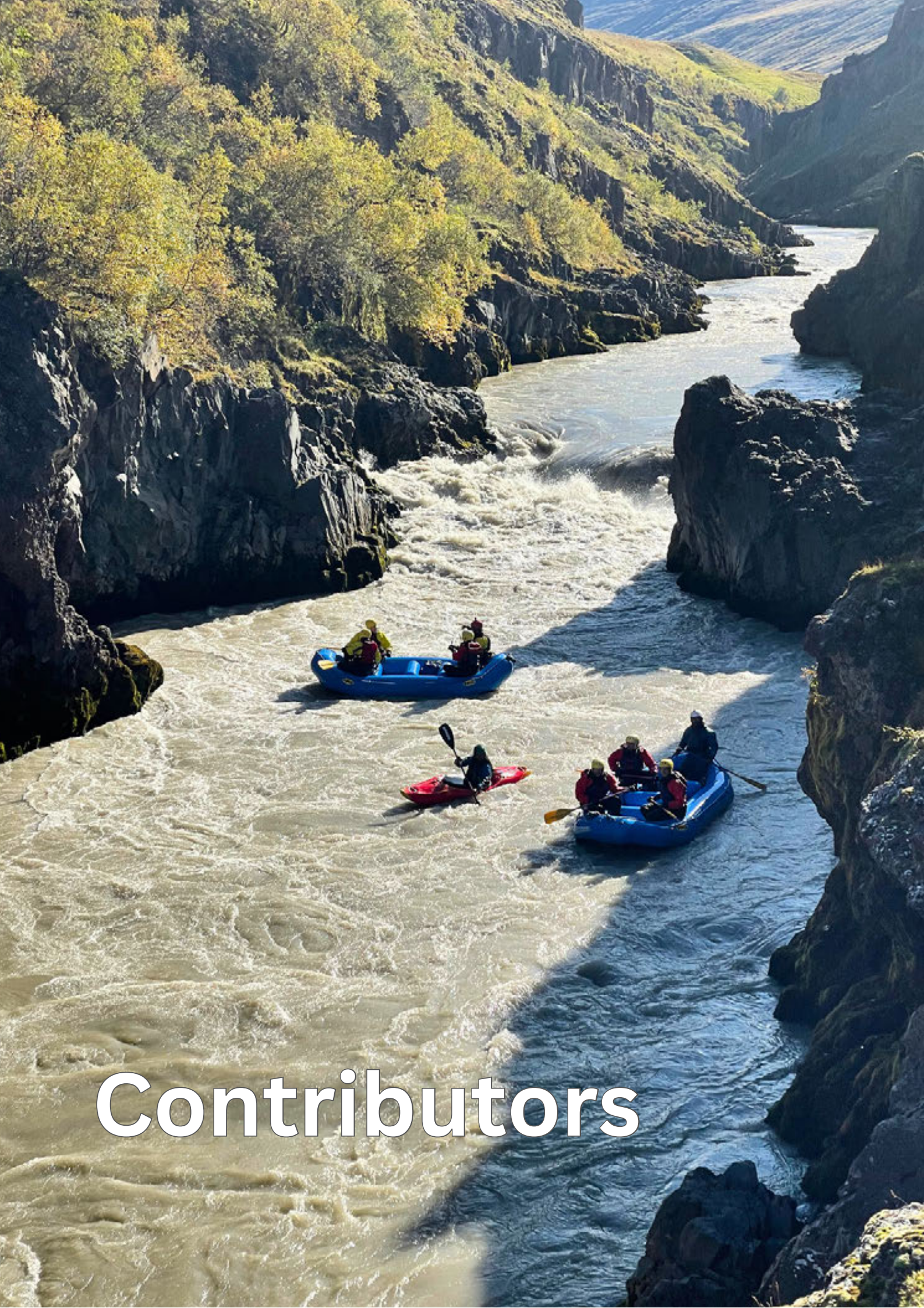
Effective leaders embrace best practices in destination management, staying informed about emerging trends, technologies, and innovative sustainability approaches. Adapting to change and harnessing new tools propels DMOs toward greater sustainability and profitability.

Collaboration and stakeholder engagement are vital for sustainable outcomes. CEOs actively engage with local communities, government bodies, industry partners, and tourists, fostering holistic and inclusive destination management.

Instilling a Trusted Advisor:

As a CEO leading a Tourism Board or DMO, effectively managing stakeholders and navigating political landscapes is crucial. Navigating conflicting interests and agendas within an organization and with external stakeholders is complex, especially for DMOs moving towards sustainability and regenerative practices. In this challenging environment, having access to a trusted external advisor, ideally a former tourism board CEO, is invaluable. They bring relevant experience and a deep understanding of DMO challenges, offering valuable insights and support.

This advisor provides a fresh perspective as a sounding board, helping balance competing interests and agendas with unbiased viewpoints. They offer strategic guidance, facilitate collaboration, and enhance leadership skills, significantly contributing to the CEO's success and the organization's progress.



Contributors



Brian Mullis

Brian Mullis is a CEO with a career dedicated to sustainable development, conservation, and tourism. With over 25 years of leadership experience, he has played a pivotal role in driving initiatives across more than 70 countries. Brian is committed to nurturing a more responsible and regenerative travel and tourism sector. Currently, he serves as an executive advisor for the Governments of Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

From 2018 to 2020, Brian led the Guyana Tourism Authority and is credited with helping Guyana gain global recognition as a leading sustainable destination.

In 2002, he founded Sustainable Travel International, a prominent nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting natural and cultural heritage in destinations and improving residents' livelihoods.

Brian's journey in sustainable tourism began with his work in National Parks. In addition to his professional roles, Brian proudly serves in various voluntary leadership capacities, including contributions to UNWTO, the US Department of Commerce, and the Transformational Travel Council Board of Directors.

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Hjörtur Smárason

Hjörtur Smárason is an expert in place branding and destination development and a communications strategist. He has worked for cities, regions and countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Arctic. Hjörtur is the former CEO of Visit Greenland, where he was leading the development of adventure travel and sustainable tourism in one of the most remote and challenging destinations in the World.

Hjörtur has worked with places in distress on their crisis communications, whether being caused by pandemics, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, economic crises, conflict or political turmoil. This includes Iceland, Nepal after the earthquakes of 2015, Greenland during and after covid, and countries in Africa and the Middle East. He has also taught courses in Marketing and Innovation and product development at the tourism department of Holar University College.

Hjörtur has developed leadership training and astronaut field training expeditions in collaboration with scientists and astronauts from NASA. As a keynote speaker, he shares insights on powerful storytelling, crisis management, sustainability and the lessons of space travel for Earth. He also conducts innovation workshops for the travel industry and has authored a number of articles and book chapters on leadership, tourism and future strategies.

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Dr. Jens Thraenhart

With over 30 years of global travel and tourism expertise, Dr. Jens Thraenhart is the Founding Partner of 24-year-old bespoke strategy consulting firm Chameleon Strategies. He currently serves as the 2nd Vice Chair of the World Tourism Organization's UNWTO Affiliate Members and has held various leadership roles in the tourism industry.

In 2021, Jens took on the role of CEO at Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. (BTMI), where he oversaw a remarkable recovery from the pandemic and positioned Barbados as a sustainable destination. He previously served as the Executive Director/CEO of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO), founded private-sector led regional tourism marketing organization Destination Mekong, and co-founded the acclaimed digital marketing firm Dragon Trail in 2008. Jens has also held leadership positions with Destination Canada and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts (now Accor).

Throughout his career, Jens has been recognized for his contributions to the travel industry, including being named one of the top 25 extraordinary minds in hospitality sales and marketing by HSMAI and one of the top 10 Most Influential Leaders in Travel in 2022 by Travel Vertical. As founder of the Destination Film Forum, he has served on the Jury of the Cannes Lion International Film Awards. He holds a Doctorate in Tourism Management from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and graduated from Cornell University with a Master's in Hospitality Management.

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About Sustainability Leaders United

In an era where sustainability is not just a choice but a necessity, visionary leaders are stepping up to drive meaningful change. "Sustainability Leaders United" is a groundbreaking initiative - community and online platform - that shines a spotlight on the individuals and organizations at the forefront of the sustainability revolution.



Discover the stories of remarkable leaders who have made it their mission to transform industries, protect our planet, and create a more sustainable future for all. Sustainability Leaders United takes you on a journey through the lives and achievements of sustainability champions from around the globe.

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- **Meet the Visionaries:** Gain insight into the lives, motivations, and unique journeys of individuals around the world who are redefining tourism business, travel and destination development.
- **Innovative Solutions:** Explore the innovative approaches and strategies employed by these pioneers to address complex issues such as climate change, biodiversity restoration, renewable energy, circular economies, and social responsibility.
- **Leadership Insights:** Learn from the failures and successes of leaders and changemakers. Take a look behind the scenes of world's leading destinations and tourism businesses.

Sustainability Leaders in Tourism

Whether you're a seasoned sustainability advocate, a budding community leader, or a curious reader, this professional Handbook offers inspiration and actionable insights to empower you to make a difference.

Like its accompanying online platform and community, Sustainability-Leaders.com, this book is not just a collection of changemaker stories and success strategies: it's a call to action.

Join the movement and be part of the many passionate individuals committed to creating a sustainable, regenerative, and equitable tourism for generations to come.

[**Sustainability-Leaders.com**](#)



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