

The Efficiency Paradox: Building Resilient Systems Through Sustainable Leadership

Maja Domijan, Eventful

This session challenges the idea that maximum efficiency always makes tourism businesses stronger. It shows that systems optimised to 100% capacity often become fragile, while resilient organisations need space, flexibility, shared purpose, and people-centred leadership.

1. Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

Today, we are not here to talk about how to squeeze more out of our teams. In fact, I want to challenge the very idea of “more”.

We live in a paradox. The more we optimise our businesses for efficiency, the more fragile they can become. When everything runs at full capacity, there is no space left for disruption, illness, crisis, creativity, or recovery.

In tourism and events, we often celebrate being fast, flexible, and able to solve problems under pressure. But if this becomes constant firefighting, it is not resilience. It is a warning sign.

Key message:

Do not build a cage of efficiency. Build a bridge to resilience.

2. Challenges facing tourism and event organisations

Many tourism and event businesses are built around hidden vulnerabilities.

Common challenges include:

- one key person without whom everything stops
- one process that nobody else understands
- teams constantly working at full capacity
- lack of time for reflection, learning, and recovery
- burnout treated as an individual weakness rather than a management problem

We often call the key person a “star employee”. But if the whole business depends on one person, this is not efficiency, but a risk.

I experienced this personally. For a long time, I was that person in Eventful. I handled calls, proposals, sales, strategy, and marketing. I thought this made the company efficient. But when my health forced me to stop, I realised that if a business depends on one person’s health, it is not a strong business. It is a ticking time bomb.

3. What resilience really means

Efficiency means doing things right, at the lowest possible cost.

That works well when conditions are stable. But tourism does not operate in stable conditions. We face seasonality, crises, staff shortages, changing demand, external shocks, and constant pressure.

Resilience means being able to continue, adapt, and learn when the storm comes.

A resilient organisation is not one that keeps people running at 100% all the time. It is an organisation that creates strategic slack.

Strategic slack means intentional breathing room. It is not laziness or inefficiency. It is the space needed to adapt, recover, think, and respond when the market changes or when life happens.

People are not machines. You cannot run a human being at 100% capacity all the time and expect no consequences.

Burnout is not only a personal problem. Very often, it is a system failure.

4. Sustainable leadership: from pressure to purpose

When crisis comes, spreadsheets break and processes fail. What remains is purpose.

People do not give 110% because of a quarterly bonus or a better app. They give more when they believe in the “why”.

Purpose is what keeps people connected when everything else becomes uncertain. In tourism, hospitality, and events, this is especially important because the work is highly emotional, creative, and people-based.

Leaders therefore need to change the questions they ask.

Instead of asking:

How much more can we deliver this month?

They should ask:

How long can we sustain this pace without breaking the system?

Real leadership is not about winning the sprint. It is about making sure the organisation is healthy enough to run the marathon.

5. Practical actions for resilient leadership

There are three practical actions that organisations can take.

1. Audit vulnerability

Identify single points of failure.

Ask:

- Who is the only person who knows how this works?
- Which process stops if one person is unavailable?
- Where are we dependent on informal knowledge?

This matters because hidden dependencies are silent risks. The benefit is peace of mind: the organisation can continue even when one person is absent, sick, or recovering.

1. Protect bandwidth

Reduce noise and increase focus.

Constant firefighting destroys creativity. This is especially dangerous in tourism and events, where creativity is central to service quality and innovation.

Protecting bandwidth means giving teams time to recover after intense projects, reducing unnecessary overload, and allowing space for reflection.

In Eventful, this is done by giving people additional recovery time after stressful projects, not only formal vacation days. Projects are also shared among several people, so no one person carries everything alone.

2. Lead with purpose

Give the team a “why” that survives the “how”.

During a crisis, processes may fail. But a shared mission can keep people motivated. A resilient team is not only loyal to a paycheck. It is emotionally invested in the long-term success of the organisation.

6. Implementation in practice

In practice, sustainable leadership can be supported through:

- larger project teams instead of one-person dependency
- regular internal briefings
- shared project management tools, such as Monday
- monthly updates so everyone knows what is happening across projects
- additional recovery time after demanding events
- quarterly and yearly meetings
- team buildings and incentive travel that support connection and mental health

This is not only about employee well-being. It is also about better decision-making, continuity, creativity, and long-term organisational resilience.

7. Key takeaway

- A resilient organisation is like a modern bridge: strong and stable, but flexible enough to move with the wind without collapsing.
- Tourism businesses should stop optimising for fragility and start building for longevity.
- Do not aim for 100% efficiency all the time. Build systems that can breathe, adapt, and last.