

LIVE: 2023 Global EXPO Thought Leadership Conference

Last updated: Tuesday September 21, 3:53 p.m. Find updates below.

8:45 a.m.: Welcome and Introduction

After two days of networking on the [APEX/IFSA](#) and [FTE Global EXPO](#) show floor, the events are heading upstairs to Long Beach Convention Center Grand Ballroom for the Thought Leadership Conference.



Anton Vidgen, APEX President

APEX President Anton Vidgen kicked off the conference by thanks all exhibitors, delegates, attendees and sponsors, adding how successful the first-ever trio of events was, APEX, IFSA and FTE Global EXPO 2023.

APEX/IFSA and FTE Group CEO Dr. Joe Leader then took to the stage to address the crowd of about 100 people. Leader used the opportunity to share a gracious thank you to Vidgen for his work as APEX

President, for which the crowd gave an enthusiastic applause. Leader also introduced the members of the APEX/IFSA Board of Governors, who then joined him on stage for the meeting.



Dr. Joe Leader, APEX/IFSA CEO

9:00a.m.: APEX/IFSA Board of Governors

Jointly appointed for a one-year renewable term by the Presidents of APEX and IFSA, the APEX/IFSA Board of Governors consists of airline CEOs and Presidents that meet each year at EXPO to provide top-level strategic guidance for the year ahead. This year, the Board voted on important topics, including:

- Empowering airlines: Expanding services beyond regulatory constraints
- APEX Greener: United Airline Environmentally Sustainability Inflight Products Initiative
- Passenger rights and government accountability: Protecting from air traffic control lapses



The APEX/IFSA Board of Governors meeting

Board members present include, in no particular order:

- [EL AL](#) CEO Dina Ben Tal Ganancia
- [Fiji Airways](#) Managing Director & CEO Andre Viljoen
- [JSX](#) CEO Alex Wilcox
- [SAS](#) EVP & CCO Paul Verhagen
- [SAUDIA](#) CEO Captain Ibrahim Koshy
- [Spirit Airlines](#) President & CEO Ted Christie
- [Xiamen Airlines](#) Chairman Zhao Dong

10:00a.m.: CEO Mainstage Session — Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive Officer His Excellency Akbar Al Baker

Next, Aaron Heslehurst, host of BBC News' [Talking Business](#), invited [Qatar Airways Group](#) CEO Akbar Al Baker to the stage for the first CEO Mainstage Session of the Conference.



Aaron Heslehurst, host of BBC News' *Talking Business* (left) and Qatar Airways Group CEO Akbar Al Baker

Heslehurst opened with the session with a well-deserved congratulations to Al Baker for the airline's many accolades, including a few recent ones from last night's APEX/IFSA Awards ceremony. Not only did Al Baker receive [CEO Lifetime Achievement Award](#), the airline was also awarded Best Food & Beverage, Best in Entertainment Award in the Middle East, and the Qatar Airways is recognized as an APEX World Class Airline.

After much thanks, Al Baker added, "I don't want to win every year. I want to give others the opportunity to win as well."

The crowd laughed and applauded, but Al Baker's main message of the sentiment was serious: It is important to be humble, for while aviation is a huge industry, it is, nonetheless the same time, a community.

11:00 a.m. CEO Mainstage Session — EL AL CEO Dina Ben Tal Ganancia

In a refreshing change of scenery, EL AL CEO Dina Ben Tal Ganancia joined Heslehurst on stage after the coffee break. The pair discussed plans for the airline to expand its network and offers more to passengers and the improved loyalty program, but what really got a show of support from the audience was Ben Tal Ganancia's advice for women in the industry.



EL AL CEO Dina Ben Tal Ganancia (right) and Aaron Heslehurst, host of BBC News' *Talking Business*

"I encourage the women here to shout: 'I want to be the next CEO,'" she said when discussing career trajectory and how the gender imbalance causes women to be largely overlooked in promotional opportunities.

"We decide everything related to travel—why wouldn't we decide everything about our careers," she said. The audience whooped and applauded.

Ben Tal Ganancia said her vision for EL AL by 2030 is to fly to every continent in the world, be sustainable, and maybe introduce hybrid aircraft.

11:30am CEO Mainstage Session — Spirit Airways CEO, Tom Christie



Spirit Airlines CEO, Tom Christie and APEX CEO, Dr Joe Leader

APEX CEO Joe Leader took the interview reins to speak to Spirit Airlines President & CEO Ted Christie. Christie began by addressing “the elephant in the room” – the proposed merger with JetBlue which is currently being challenged in the courts. If successfully defended, the ‘new’ airline will create a fifth national challenger in the United States. “The fact that we have to defend the merger is a bit of a joke – we just want competition,” he said, in light of the synergies between the two airlines which are extremely complementary and well help serve network expansion into currently underserved areas.

Integration could begin as early as the end of the year.

Christie then spoke passionately about the onboard products and services and overall hospitality that has seen it become a 4* LCC carrier, narrowly missing out the top honour which unfortunately can’t be awarded to an LCC - nonetheless, Spirit remains the highest rated LCC carrier.

Services include the famous Big Front Seat and fleetwide Thales Wi-Fi.

The airline is also progressing well with resolving its engine issues, but a real priority Christie said, is addressing airspace congestion, which is ultimately affecting domestic expansion plans. Internationally, Spirit is looking at investing in more destinations and domestic departure points as part of its growth plans.

1:30pm CEO Mainstage Session — Captain Ibrahim Koshy, SAUDIA

This afternoon’s sessions included conversations guided by Shashank Nigram, Founder and CEO of [Simplifying](#).



Captain Ibrahim Koshy (left), CEO of SAUDIA, speaks to Shashank Nigram (right)

Up first, was Captain Ibrahim Koshy, CEO of SAUDIA, who began by highlighting the recovery of air travel in region and globally.

Post COVID, the airline is investing not just in new aircraft additions such A321neos and XLRs, and 787s, but in the overall onboard passenger experience, with Bluetooth compatible ASTROVA IFE from Panasonic Avionics and lie-flat seating in Business Class on its narrowbody fleet.

Captain Koshy was at pains to stress a consistent experience between on the ground and inflight as well as between aircraft types, whether new aircraft or existing aircraft retrofitted with these new solutions.

The talk also covered the airline's use of SAF and LCAF (low-carbon aviation fuel) as it strives to meet its environmental objectives, and the country's national Vision 2030 program. Today marked the first flight between Red Sea International Airport and King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, with the aircraft using SAF.

1:55pm CEO Mainstage Session — Andre Viljoen, Fiji Airways



Fiji Airways Managing Director and CEO, Andre Viljoen (left)

Swapping continents, Fiji Airways Managing Director and CEO, Andre Viljoen took to the stage for the final session of the day. Emphasising 'Bula' or 'Welcome' Fiji Airways is an ambassador for the 33-island Pacific nation.

With 21 aircraft, more than 94 percent of its passengers are travelling for leisure.

Under Viljoen, the airline has transformed from a 2.5 star airline in 2015, ranked 100 in the world, to a 5-star major airline in 2013, ranked 15. This is put down to changing its mental mode and determination to succeed and compete against its bigger rivals.

Sharing his leadership management, Viljoen said his purpose was to “develop leaders and bring the best out of people.” Touching upon vertical growth, Viljoen spoke about a ‘growth mindset’ and using 360 performance assessments to determine ‘Our one Big thing’.

Looking into the future, Viljoen is excited by the people – of the airline and of Fiji too. Viljoen also revealed the airline was thinking about joining a loyalty program to benefit from its scale, but no timetable was given.