



A STRATEGIC FORCE



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A Strategic Force: Facilities Management in the GCC's Infrastructure Journey

Ali Al Suwaidi, Vice Chancellor Finance & Administration, American University of Sharjah and Vice President, MEFMA on why facilities management is becoming one of the most strategic forces shaping cities, careers, and quality of life in the GCC

As facilities management moves from the background to the boardroom, Ali Al Suwaidi reflects on the industry's evolution, the realities of AI and digital transformation, and why FM professionals are uniquely positioned to shape the future of cities, assets, and communities across the region.

FM is undergoing a clear shift globally—from operational support to strategic value creation. From your perspective, what are the key messages you want the industry to take away from this conference, and which trends are shaping FM today?

The biggest message is that this industry has far more potential than many people still realise. Facilities management today touches almost every sector—education, healthcare, hospitality, infrastructure, even data centres. We are not just maintaining buildings; we are enabling how these sectors function and succeed.

What we want to communicate through this conference is that FM professionals need to think strategically about their role over the next five years. Technology is changing how we operate, sustainability is no longer optional, and economic resilience is critical. If we get these elements right, FM becomes a true business enabler, not just a service provider.

And importantly, this industry offers long, meaningful career paths. Many people are here because they see FM as a space where they can grow, lead, and make an

impact. That's why, right now, all roads really do lead to Dubai.

The GCC has become a magnet for global FM players. What's driving this influx, and how is the region shaping international best practice?

It's not just Dubai—it's the entire GCC. International companies are coming here not only to deliver expertise, but also to learn. What we are building in cities like Dubai, Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi doesn't really exist elsewhere at this scale or complexity.

These are mixed-use developments, experience-led communities, and iconic assets built at a rapid pace because demand and foreign investment are strong. Cities are competing on quality of life, and buildings have become flagships of identity and ambition. That's where FM professionals come in—we're the ones who ensure these assets perform, remain sustainable, and actually deliver on their promise.

AI and smart technologies dominate industry discussions. How do you separate real opportunity from hype in the built environment?

AI is everywhere in our personal lives now—you see it the moment you open your phone. But buildings are different. In FM, AI is not the starting point; it's the outcome.

Before talking about AI, organisations need the right foundations: systems, processes, trained people, and reliable data. AI helps us make better decisions, improve skills, and understand how buildings are truly performing—from energy use to indoor air quality and user comfort.

We're becoming more realistic as an industry. Even governments managing thousands of schools or hospitals realise they can't make decisions based only on contract performance. They need real information from the building itself, and technology helps us turn that data into insight.

MEFMA marks 15 years this year. Looking back, what moments best define the organisation's journey?

First, bringing people together. That sense of community—across countries, cultures, and sectors—has been incredibly powerful. I always tell people: don't go

At Cleanco, we are guided by a clear ambition: to create a cleaner, safer environment for communities today and for generations to come. This vision shapes everything we do. It enables us to move beyond simply running a business to drive meaningful changes through innovation and sustainability.

to work just to work. Go to learn, to add value, to grow.

Second, trust. In the early days, people asked, "What's in it for us?" Today, major clients—governments, banks, organisations like Aramco—are members. That didn't happen overnight. We had to push the wheel together before seeing the benefits.

Third, people and welfare. FM heroes matter. I've seen individuals start as cleaners and become senior managers running entire portfolios. These stories remind us that FM is an industry where ambition and opportunity truly meet.

Workplace transformation is accelerating. How should FM organisations approach technology without losing sight of people and purpose?

Technology should never be adopted just for the sake of it. If it doesn't improve user experience, sustainability, or the client's core business, then there's no real value. FM companies need to think beyond

daily operations and focus on impact. How do we enable better healthcare outcomes? Better learning environments? Better cities? My personal ambition is to see FM knowledge influence building design itself. If we design right, build right, and maintain right, we dramatically reduce lifecycle costs and resource waste.

You straddle both academia and industry. What message do you have for the next generation considering FM as a career?

FM is a career with purpose. At the American University of Sharjah, I work with students who want to contribute to society—and FM offers exactly that opportunity.

We need stronger collaboration between universities and industry to create learning that reflects real-world needs. FM rewards curiosity, ambition, and passion. If you want a career where you continuously learn, grow, and shape the built environment around you, this industry has a place for you.

