

Leaders Urge “Grace” and Balance as Workforce Summit Closes With Focus on Employee Wellbeing

At the closing session of the Workforce Development Summit on St. John, panelists urged employers to lead with empathy and “grace,” while encouraging workers to set boundaries, manage stress, and prioritize wellness in an evolving hybrid work environment.

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ST. JOHN — As the 2025 Governor’s Workforce Development Summit came to a close on Friday, panelists left attendees with a simple but powerful message: the workplace must be guided by grace, empathy, and preparation. Employers, they said, must learn to give grace to workers navigating personal and professional stress, while employees themselves must take responsibility for preparing mentally, physically, and emotionally for the demands of modern work.

The final session, held on St. John, centered on employee wellbeing, managing stress, and setting boundaries — especially in hybrid or remote work environments where the lines between home and office often blur. The discussion was led by Taetia Phillips-Dorsett, of the Department of Human Services, who emphasized that wellness is inseparable from workforce readiness.

“We can’t future-proof our workforce if our staff and our colleagues and our manpower are not in a great space — emotionally, physically, on a routine, day-to-day basis,” Phillips-Dorsett said.

Cassio Batteast, vice president of programs for the Foundation for the Mid-South, echoed that sentiment, cautioning against glorifying burnout as a sign of strength. “Resilient doesn’t mean working harder,” he said. True resilience, Batteast argued, is about being “in a position to be healthy enough to do your job.”

Panelists agreed that hybrid and work-from-home models present unique challenges that can heighten stress. “Most stresses, sometimes, is at home, right?” Batteast observed. “So you’re asking me now to be in a space where all of my stress is.” With the workplace and home now merged for many employees, he said, maintaining balance has become even more critical.

Batteast warned that remote workers often overextend themselves in an effort to prove their productivity. “We sometimes think that because we are remote and we’re not in the office, we can work harder. But no. It’s about balance,” he said firmly.

Jamilya Christopher, People Operations Partner at Marshall+Sterling, agreed that setting physical boundaries is key. “A lot of times, people wake up from their bed and go straight to their desk,” she said. “I think having a prepared space, separate from your bedroom, is a really good boundary to start.”

Carla Scott, a member of the Workforce Development Board, took the discussion further, calling on employers to show compassion. “I always try to encourage the management to be mindful of the fact that probably what they’re coming into the workplace with has nothing to do with you. So give grace,” Scott said. “There’s so many things that you have to do as a leader in an organization to be mindful of your employees and know that everyone’s situation is not the same.”

Scott said regular check-ins are essential for maintaining morale and productivity. “It also tells you how much productivity you’re going to get out of that person at any given moment,” she noted. Christopher agreed, saying leaders must be able to “spot and identify when people on your team are not doing well.”

That kind of awareness, Scott added, is especially crucial in today’s uncertain economic environment. “You see layoffs and more people scared to lose their jobs. People think they have to do more; they have to work longer hours,” she said. “It is really a critical time for you to kind of do some self-reflection.” She urged both leaders and employees to recognize that “longer hours don’t mean productivity.”

Panelists also highlighted the importance of teaching these lessons to the next generation. “Our youth also suffer burnout, right? Our youth also suffer stress,” Batteast said. “We’re asking them to show up to a program to give their all. But I’m at home dealing with certain stresses.”

He urged policymakers and employers alike to create more space for youth mental health in workforce programming. “As we build on our workforce development programming, we also have to make sure that we allow those spaces for our young people to get the mental health and emotional health that they need,” he said.

As the summit concluded, the takeaway was clear: a healthy, productive workforce begins with understanding — from leadership and workers alike. Balancing empathy, structure, and self-awareness, panelists said, is essential to building the resilient and adaptable workforce the Virgin Islands will need for the future.

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