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**9<sup>TH</sup>**  
**TOURISM**  
**HUMAN RESOURCES**  
**CONFERENCE**

Executive Insights: Harnessing the Energy & Passion of our Tourism Workforce to Innovate

**PRESENTER**  
**PATRICIA AFFONSO-DASS**  
President, Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association

Building a Resilient, High-Performing and Sustainable  
Caribbean Tourism Workforce for Global Competitiveness

Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands | November 28-30, 2018  
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**Presentation by: Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA) President, Patricia Affonso-Dass**

## **‘Harnessing the Energy & Passion of Our Tourism Workforce to Innovate Grow’**

Good afternoon.

It is my distinct pleasure to be with you today and to participate in this important conference and I wish to thank the Caribbean Tourism Organization for inviting me. I’m here today in a few different capacities.

First, as President of the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association, I will touch on some of our ‘People Development’ initiatives and bring some regional private sector thinking into our discourse.

In my capacity with Ocean Hotels in Barbados, with oversight responsibility for three hotels and around 350 team members, I will share an on-the-ground perspective, bringing practical best practices and lessons-learned experiences.

And finally, I hope to add a personal perspective drawn from the core of my Caribbean being, a life of interesting challenges, trials, collaborations and rich personal and professional rewards, gained through

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my good fortune of having lived and worked in Dominica, Antigua, Guyana, Trinidad, Barbados and the United States.

***A Bit About Me....***

I guess it is fair to say that much of life and my career has been about re-invention, innovation, jumping in at the deep end and figuring out how to swim. I have never been afraid to say yes to a challenge and always encourage those that I work with and manage to step UP TO, rather than away from challenges that appear daunting or difficult.

My greatest personal and professional growth has come from working through adversity, staring it in the face and moving forward – an attitude that is informed by the fact that I can't change what is behind me but I can most certainly influence what happens next, where I go and how I grow – whether I am happy to remain where I am or climb to the top of the hill to see what lies on the horizon.

When I think about my career, from my very first job in Antigua after university where I was tasked with doing the leg work involved with moving the Caribbean Hotel and Training Institute office from Puerto Rico; to my work in Guyana managing and revitalizing a historic business hotel, building and managing jungle resorts and working on tourism from the ground up as a founder member and first female president of the Tourism Association of Guyana; to Barbados where over the past 20 years I have managed hotels, opened and run a marine aquarium park and been President of the BHTA; to my current role as CEO of Ocean Hotels and President of CHTA - the common thread throughout has been people and people development.

Central to my progression and success is my genuine interest in, and care for people. The ability to see them as individuals, to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, being tough enough to push myself and them to do more than we believed we were capable of, while being open and available to listen, support, encourage, and yes where necessary, discipline or terminate in order to ensure that I developed strong, empowered, trained and informed teams.

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Anyone who knows me knows that I LOVE this industry, I am one of these incredibly lucky people who according to the Chinese proverb has never worked a day in their life because they are doing a job that they love.

I also passionately believe that in our industry, cooperation, collaboration, flexibility, innovation and a strong, collaborative public and private relationship is critical to the success of the sector. It is for that reason that wherever I have worked I have devoted time and energy not just to my particular business, but also to the community in which we operate and to the National and regional associations that represent us.

Real success as a tourism destination or tourism business requires the ability to be nimble, adaptable, open to change, on trend and where possible ahead of the curve. The most successful understand that while repeat guests are a sound barometer of success, we must keep innovating and reinventing ourselves and our destinations keeping the best parts but presenting them in new refreshing ways; adding different adventures and experiences, so that our guests don't only come back, but continue to spend, refer and support while our people learn new skills and have the opportunity to obtain real financial and professional value from the industry.

### ***The Uniqueness of the Caribbean Hospitality Industry...***

I truly believe that our strength as a region lies in the diversity and richness of our destinations and our people. We are comprised of over 30 destinations with a heritage rooted in Europe, Africa, Asia, South and North America and with distinct political, historical, architectural and cultural ties to France, the Netherlands, Spain, England and the United States.

Our region dances and sings to 200 types of music, and our food over time and through integration and innovation is now a blend of spices and flavours that trace back to our roots - but with a taste that is distinctly Caribbean.

Those who came before us fought and marched defiantly out of slavery and oppression to carve out a new destiny as proud and free Caribbean men and women. This celebration of our freedom and our unique Caribbean personality is probably best displayed through our amazing annual carnivals and festivals featuring costumes rich in colour. Fantastical designs created from bent wire, covered with

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fabric, feathers and coloured paper - paraded through the streets to the beat of instruments made from cowbells, goat skin drums, whistles, bottles and spoons, tire irons and the steel pan - the only *non-electronic, acoustic musical instrument invented in the 20th century! Innovation at its finest!*

We live in a vulnerable region that is susceptible to the forces of nature. We are young nations, most of whom have only been self-governing for just over half a century. We live on small volcanic or coral outcrops, many with physically challenging terrain, and many within the last century have faced daunting political, economic and natural challenges.

If we think about it, our region and our people are by default resilient, strong, creative, passionate and innovative, and I believe that it is these very characteristics that provide the DNA of our amazing tourism industry.

### ***Key Qualities of Successful Hospitality Businesses and Destinations***

The question is - how do we harness this energy, creativity and passion in our businesses and destinations so that we derive the greatest value, not only from a revenue perspective for our islands, but for the personal and professional development of our people so that they have the opportunity to obtain real value for themselves and their families and understand and appreciate their role in, and their importance to, the success of the industry and our tourism product?

How do we build upon these core strengths – drawing from the already proven capacity of our people? We can learn not only from studying our own successes, but also by looking at some of the best practices by companies, individuals and destinations around the world.

Much of what we need to be successful destinations and companies is already within us. Harnessing this, building upon it, and effectively implementing it into our broader company and community cultures – that's our challenge.

We can be guided by global hospitality leaders like J.W. Marriott, a visionary who said many decades ago:

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*“If you take care of your people, they will take care of your customers, and your business will take care of itself”*

We can look to leaders like Sir Richard Branson, who shows no fear of losing employees to competitors with his dual approach to people development - well-illustrated in his famous quote:

*“Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don’t want to.”*

And I look at my own company and how we’ve taken a deliberate approach to develop our people, providing them with the technical training to do their jobs and opportunities to gain international exposure through work attachments abroad, while teasing out their views and problem solving skills to help build a successful operation, working as teams, motivating and empowering them, while rewarding and recognizing their successes.

My personal belief is that ***“Team engagement and open communication drives performance, improves morale, productivity and passion and ultimately fuels innovation and business improvement.”***

At Ocean Hotels, monthly Employee Rap Sessions that involve managers, supervisors and team members provide a safe respectful environment in which team members can brainstorm challenges, voice opinions, put new ideas on the table and play a real part in identifying service deficiencies, solving problems and designing their work processes.

From a creative perspective, our WOW Committee is made up of team members who are charged with creating and crafting guest experiences to “surprise and delight” our guests. The idea being, that if staff feel listened to, included and valued and have the opportunity to make a real contribution they are likely to perform to a much higher standard.

I guess you can say that it speaks directly to the principle that if 80% of a person’s time at work is filled with them doing things, they love they will truly love what they do – in the hospitality industry it shows!

We simply cannot ignore the power of unleashing the hospitality intellect of our people and the deep-rooted passion and desire that they have to serve and share.

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***Behind the Numbers – Arrivals, Guest Satisfaction, Employee Satisfaction, Profits***

I believe that key to unlocking employee engagement, passion and involvement is open communication and information sharing. As they say – Knowledge is Power!

In our world of hospitality, listening carefully to the customer – through the myriad of means now available - is critical, and data collection, analysis, sharing and ongoing review by both the public and private sector is key to the effective use of our precious resources both human and financial.

All too often in the region, particularly with Governments, we mistakenly define our success by only focusing on visitor arrival numbers. While these are important, there are other barometers which delve into what's really behind the numbers.

Sound, appropriate and timely data from multiple-sources should help inform our decision making and much of this data should be shared with employees to help create a more informed understanding of the industry, its importance to them, the company and the destination, and their role in driving performance.

Being open about the numbers, sharing both good and bad performance information with team members and involving them in discussions related to changes that improve efficiency, reduce cost and enhance the experience, ultimately gives employees a sense of ownership and heightens the understanding of their value to and impact on the business.

On the public sector side, destinations need to be doing more across the region to share the Tourism is Key message which highlights the critical importance of **all persons** in a tourism-based economy to our socio-economic wellbeing.

Don't just count the numbers coming off the planes and ships - the number that really matters is the economic value of each visitor to the destination through the multiplier or trickledown effect of the tourism dollar.

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In an effort to paint a clearer picture of the multiplier effect and the importance of studying economic value as opposed to simply arrival numbers, we can look at a value comparison between traditional hotels and the alternative accommodation sector.

While many destinations tout the “success and growth” of the alternate accommodation sector – VBRO, AirBnB and a host of others – as disruptive innovators in hospitality, it is important for employees and governments to appreciate the special role which traditional hotels provide to the socio-economic well-being of the destination, their communities, their families and their livelihood.

To provide an example of the difference in the value to the economy we can consider the result of research conducted in 2017 by CBRE for the Hotel Association of Canada. The research showed that

- For every 185 full-time equivalent jobs in the hotel sector, there is an estimated 1 full time equivalent job within the Airbnb sharing platform and
- In 2016, guests of Canada’s hotel properties contributed an estimated \$2.2 billion in consumer taxes and fees based on room revenues alone. If the rates were to be applied to Airbnb revenues, Canada’s Airbnb sector has the potential to contribute \$85 million in consumer taxes and fees to the Canadian economy. Presently, their contribution is far below this.

Similarly, while visitor arrival numbers generated by cruise lines are “significant” to the visitor head count in a destination, the cruise line industry’s impact on employment and tax revenue is typically between 7 and 8 percent of the overall tourist spend when compared to land-based visitors.

So while all tourism sectors are important to a destination’s overall success, careful attention, focused resources on investments in education and training, and a legislative framework that ensures a level playing field and allows for growth and sustainability by those providing the largest multiplier effect should be given priority by the public and private sectors.

### ***Understanding Innovation, Innovators and Employee Motivations***

Unleashing the power to innovate starts with leadership.

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Leadership does not automatically get bestowed upon someone because they have a title. As Apple Founder, the late Steve Jobs said, “Management is about persuading people to do things they do not want to do, while leadership is about inspiring people to do things, they never thought they could.”

A key quality of leadership is the ability to innovate and by extension inspire those around him or her to innovate, to do more than they believe that they are capable of. It requires great communication skills, information sharing and transparency and what I call “the believability factor”, developing relationships based on trust and openness, having a clear vision and sharing it with those who need to make it work.

It is also important to recognize that leadership can exist at every level of an organization – from the front desk to the back of the house... from an entry-level person to the CEO. With that in mind, I encourage you to have a keen eye for spotting young and emerging leaders and to develop programs within your business that allow these rising stars to take on additional responsibility, see a clear progression path, lead key projects and be engaged in the decisions that affect their work in order to foster and grow tomorrow’s leaders and innovators.

With this in mind, CHTA, through its People Development Initiative will be rolling out its Young Leaders Forum aimed identifying the next generation of Caribbean Hospitality Leaders. This program will seek out the best and the brightest young tourism leaders in each destination, give them a seat at the table, a voice within the organization and a means by which they can bring their energy and ideas to the forefront. There is tremendous energy and enthusiasm out there and the idea is for CHTA to be able to harness it in a way that strengthens and grows the organization and the industry in the region.

I am truly thankful when I look back on my career for all of those persons that I worked with that recognized potential in me, allowed me to step up and encouraged me to grow – without their support and encouragement I am certain my path would have been a very different one.

In hospitality people are our most important asset - they give life to the experience. A hotel is really just bricks and mortar without the people who provide the service and the soul, and as such, in my opinion,

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investing in their development, caring about their wellbeing and giving them the tools, training and motivation to be exceptional should be job #1 for those trusted with positions of management.

The majority of business professionals agree that innovation is critical to their success. A recent study by Accenture revealed that more than 90 percent of executives believe long-term success of their organization's strategy depends on their ability to develop new ideas.

So that we can better understand the traits which are embodied in successful innovators, and therefore the ones we should seek to develop in our team members, let's look at the Six Traits of Successful Innovators as shared during a recent Virgin Atlantic 'Disrupters Debate' in Silicon Valley, where Leila Janah explained how she believes we were all programmed to innovate.

While the focus of the debate was for entrepreneurs, I'd like to suggest that it applies to all of us. Indeed, each of us in an organization should consider our role as being that of an entrepreneur and we should encourage our employees to do the same.

So, here's some food for thought.... six disrupter traits that are worth paying careful attention to in your business to drive innovation and growth.

- 1. Resilience.** Adversity is the lifeblood of an entrepreneur, and resilience is all part of pushing for the dream, not reaching and then giving up half way. Failure happens, but true innovators can always come back from it. Resilience to failure means understanding that it isn't personal. Create an environment within your organization where team members feel safe to fail – it may sound crazy but it pays dividends...
- 2. Rule breaking.** "Life is short; break the rules," the quote from Mark Twain is one of Richard Branson's favourites. I have found that encouraging team members to question the rules does a number of things – it helps them better understand and appreciate why they do what they do, encourages them to think critically and gives them a voice.
- 3. Flexibility.** The capacity to bend but never break is a vital skill that underpins real innovation. All too often businesses have such inflexible processes that they become rigid. Success in our



business is all about adaptability, being able to respond and change quickly to any number of conditions.

4. **Managing fear.** The key, is to develop an environment where there is an understanding that fear is healthy and necessary to taking bold steps. It's how we manage our fears and disguise them from the watching world that really counts.
5. **Vision.** An innovator who is prepared to pursue their dream against high odds is someone with a very strong unshakeable vision, like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook who famously turned down Yahoo's offer of £1 billion to buy the company. The key is being able to communicate that vision. People have failed in business with great innovations because they haven't communicated their vision to all involved in the organisation to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal.
6. **Tenacity.** I like to think of this as "stickability", or to use an actual word – persistence. My constant mantra to my team is "keep focused, remember the mission and keep moving forward". A positive, 'can do' attitude is essential.

If we keep these traits in mind and foster them in our businesses, they will go a long way to harnessing the energy and passion of our workforce to innovate and grow.

***In seeking to bring out the best in our team members, it's important to understand what motivates them***

I don't think that any of us in this room is unfamiliar with the fact that HR research has shown time and time again that money is not the primary motivator for employees.

Let's not be misleading, money is a motivator, but it's the factors which touch our intrinsic needs which truly motivate us.

While research shows that the order of those factors may shift by generation, culture and background, industry, age and sex – the fundamental factors are all the same and money is never the primary motivator.

Let's look at some key findings from employee performance research recently conducted by [Gallup](#):

- Only 2 in 10 employees strongly agree that their performance is managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work.
- 30% of employees strongly agree that their manager involves them in goal setting.
- Employees whose managers involve them in goal setting are 3.6x more likely than other employees to be engaged.
- 21% of employees strongly agree they have performance metrics that are within their control.
- 14% of employees strongly agree that the performance reviews they receive inspire them to improve.
- 26% of employees strongly agree that the feedback they receive helps them to do their work better.

The result? Gallup estimates the cost of poor management and lost productivity from employees in the U.S. who are not engaged, or actively disengaged, to be between **\$960 billion and \$1.2 trillion** per year.

I think we can all agree that there's a lot left on the table.

So what can leaders do to motivate their employees?

In addition to fair financial remuneration, today's progressive companies engage employees in creating and reviewing missions, goals, problem solving, and identifying new ways of doing things. Performance expectations are developed collaboratively and there is a sense of belonging and trust in management. Successful leaders take a genuine interest in their people and their lives and recognize and award individuals and teams for their performance, inspiring confidence, engendering loyalty, and stimulating even greater future performance

**Turning Team Members to Brand Ambassadors Social Responsibility and Brand Identity Go Hand-In-Hand**

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Every day each and every one of our team members is both a company and a country or destination Ambassador. They communicate to the world who we are as a company - our core values and philosophy. They convey a sense of national culture and societal standards.

Whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not – in our business we are all brand ambassadors.

To the tourist, these ambassadorial skills can inspire immediate responses, positive and negative, on social media. They can build loyalty and in turn advocates who sell the resort and destination to family and friends. Conversely, a bad experience can have the reverse effect.

Most of our employees in the Caribbean have a great sense of national pride. They want to showcase our natural beauty, culture, and sense of hospitality to the world. To remind you of a comment that I made earlier in the presentation - our People are our greatest asset – they are the soul of the experience.

So how do we inspire employees to be better brand ambassadors? Here are some tips garnered from brand experts:

### **1. Acknowledge Reality.... the Good and the Not-So-Good**

Our employees know our brand better than anyone and how it's been received. Don't sugar coat the issues. Lay strengths and challenges on the table. Use data to support this. Share concerns and get employees involved in fixing them.

### **2. Listen To What Employees Hear**

Really listen to what employees are hearing from customers. Nothing is more disconcerting to employees than providing feedback and having it ignored only to then have management pay attention when a consultant or customer comes in and says the same thing.

### **3. Give Them Context**

As pointed out earlier, our company vision, goals and focus provide the backdrop for who we are and our brand's promise. Having employees involved in shaping this.... helping to create the context – helps ensure they will deliver on it.



#### **4. Treat Employees With Deep Respect**

Creating an atmosphere of respect is contagious. It must first emanate from owners and top management and from there permeate throughout the company to every employee. From that, it shows in every encounter with a guest and in those we have throughout our community.

#### **5. Encourage Them To Speak In Their Own Voice**

The insights of employees are invaluable. Ensure an environment at the team and individual levels which constantly defines, reviews, protects and enhances the brand.

#### **6. Allow Them To Be The Hero**

Give your employees opportunities to be upfront brand ambassadors – as the manager you should not always be the star of the show. Let your team members shine and remember success is reflective. Giving employees opportunities to develop positive self-esteem is one of the simplest but most underutilized motivators. Recognition and positive reinforcement pay huge dividends.

#### **7. Engender Pride in Being Part of Your Brand**

An often-overlooked element of this pride lies with how your company is perceived in the community. Is your company a desired place to work? Is there a connection between company and community which enhances the profile of the company and every employee who works there? What does 'social responsibility' mean and how does it reinforce the company and country brand. Pride and loyalty go hand-in-hand.

At Ocean Two Resorts we pride ourselves in empowering our team members to be the company's voice and heart throughout the community.

Let me share with you some of our social responsibility projects and how we have been innovative, doing things the non-traditional way.



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Usually when people hear of social responsibility, they think of donating large sums of monies to an organization or charity. We've taken a different approach by forming close relationships with our partners and learning exactly what needs they have.

We encourage our employees to get involved in activities that can benefit the community, this way we get buy-in from our employees and they willingly contribute using their initiative so that it's not a case of the business having to provide the direction but rather the support. The innovative ideas on how to raise funds or how to give and obtain support comes from our employees.

In our Arbor Day programs, we've become innovative in the ways that we communicate environmental responsibility to the students in our adopted school. Our team members research and prepare handouts and materials for the students that are easy for them to understand at their level, as they range from ages 5- 12 years old. This helps our team members learn as they collect the research and provides teachers with materials that they can then use as points of discussion in the classroom.

With our interns we've taken an innovative approach in the way we help them to learn and grow. Our interns are aligned to areas of interest as we believe individuals work better when they are doing what they love. Traditional internships typically rotate the student through the main departments like clockwork. Our internship program is tailor-made for the student. Our students are exposed to working with the Duty Managers and the General Manager, areas not traditionally found in internship programs.

We have become innovative in reducing the use of plastic at our hotel and now have a strict no straw or plastic policy in effect at our bars. We have also implemented the use of cups made from actual coconut shells.

Our housekeeping crew was tasked with coming up with natural agents as alternatives to traditional chemical products. We use tea tree oil and vinegar to clean toilet bowls and vinegar and essence of peppermint as a glass cleaner. Vinegar is used to descale our room wares and kettles and dishwashers. Essence of peppermint, peppermint oil and orange oil are used as air fresheners. These measures reduce costs but also provide a safer work environment for our team members and a great guest experience.

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These are some small but significant examples of employee empowerment, coming up with innovative ideas to solve both company and community problems. Through this process - we've reinforced the social responsibility aspect of our brand to visitors and residents and instilled greater pride and passion in our team members for our brand.

***Beyond the Workplace.... The Continuum of People Development - Because Change Is Constant.... We Must Constantly Change***

Because change is constant, we must constantly change. Adaptability is akin to survival. On a trip I took to the Galapagos Islands last year a saying attributed to Charles Darwin was everywhere – “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change - EVOLVE”.

I came away not just with tee shirt but with a commitment to weaving this ideology into everything that I did both personally and professionally. If we don't recognize and appreciate that change is inevitable or are unwilling to innovate, grow and reinvent ourselves and our businesses we are doomed to frustration, sadness and failure.

Our Customer Has Changed. Today's consumer is more educated, more independent, more diverse, more affluent, more traveled, more discerning and has higher expectations.

Renewed and ongoing commitments to the development of our people at all levels and all stages within the people development continuum is essential to our socio-economic well-being. We simply cannot look at people development in a vacuum.

Our approach must encompass engagement and an appreciation of the value of tourism to our lives and economic wellbeing from kindergarten through high school and beyond education and training institutions.

School-to-work transition and internship initiatives; professional development and skills training toward credentialing, licensing and certification; leadership development; commitments to supporting

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scholarships, internships, apprenticeships; and closely aligning industry with the education and training community to build stronger linkages and programs which are more relevant to the changing workplace.

### ***The Power of Collaboration***

Partnerships between business and education and training institutions yields positive results but I would maintain that they are inadequate to meet today's needs.

Regionally, CHTA and CTO, and local initiatives have focused on:

- New and Modified Curriculum addressing hospitality needs – available both on and offline.
- Scholarships for Hundreds of Caribbean Nationals for tourism-related studies
- Certificate, Certification and Credentialing Training Programs
- Foreign Language Training
- Diversity Training
- Customer Service Training
- Culinary Skills Training
- Entrepreneur and Business Development Training
- Industry Internships for Students and Educators

There is tremendous potential to build upon these initiatives, sharing best practices and shaping meaningful partnerships between business, education, training institutions, labor and governments.

Despite these pockets of success....

- Far too many in industry still view training as an expense, not an investment
- Our education system in the region is still too, resistance to change with insufficient emphasis on preparing students for the realities of the workplace and the range of job and career opportunities which exist today and
- Workforce development efforts by the public/private sectors inadequate

A new level of commitment and engagement towards the development of our greatest resource – our people – must be commensurate with our recognition that our people are our greatest resource and we

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must challenge ourselves and our businesses to recognize and develop not just our general workforce but most especially our young leaders.

The opportunities in our industry for our people...as entrepreneurs and hospitality professionals...are endless. Hundreds of types of businesses exist in tourism today. More than one out of every ten people in the world work in travel and tourism – the world’s largest industry. There are over 1,000 different job and career classifications in this dynamic and ever-changing industry.

The choice is ours – do we continue at a measured pace or do we collectively commit to harnessing the energy and passion of our Tourism Workforce to innovate, grow and propel our businesses and our region forward.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.