

# BEAUTY CHANGES LIVES ROUNDTABLE

AT AMERICA'S BEAUTY SHOW

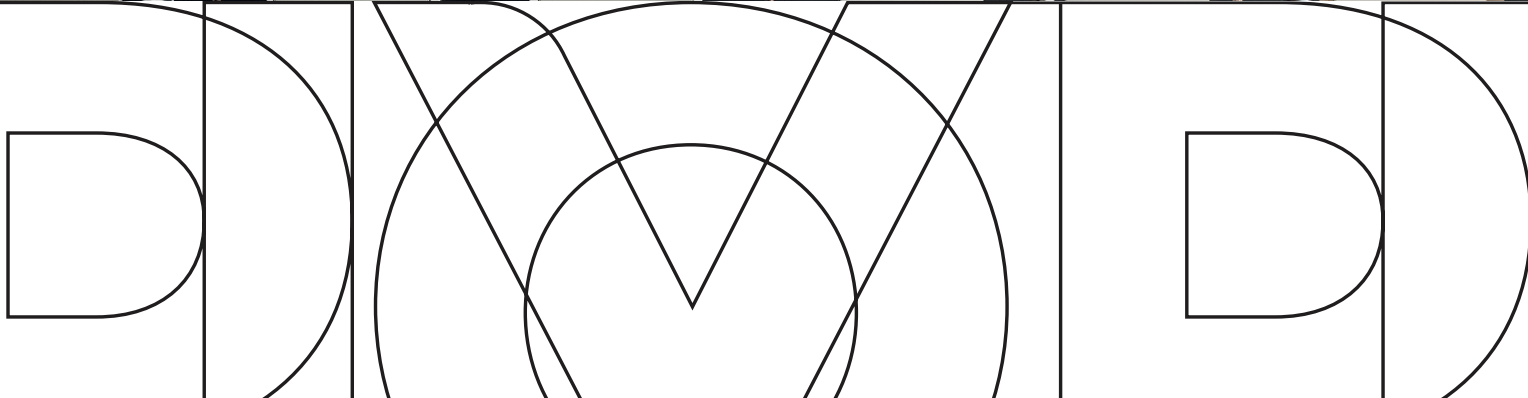


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## CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE ROUNDTABLE

### SCHOOL TO SALON: **EXPLORING THE DISCONNECT**

SATURDAY, APRIL 18  
**9:00–10:30 AM**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Summary – Key Takeaways</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Participants</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Review of Key Themes</b>	
1. Major Gap: School vs. Salon Reality	<b>5</b>
2. Misaligned Expectations (Both Sides)	<b>5</b>
3. The “Transition Gap” (Critical Failure Point)	<b>6</b>
4. Leadership & Culture Can Be a Root Cause	<b>6</b>
5. Training & Mentorship Gaps	<b>7</b>
6. Communication & People Skills Deficit	<b>7</b>
7. Unrealistic Influence of Social Media	<b>8</b>
8. Consumer Expectations Add Pressure	<b>8</b>
9. Economic & Structural Pressures	<b>9</b>
10. Emotional & Psychological Challenges	<b>9</b>
11. Education System Limitations	<b>10</b>
12. Need for Industry Alignment	<b>10</b>
<b>Students – What to Understand as You Begin Your Career</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Roundtable Partners</b>	
About Beauty Changes Lives	<b>12</b>
About Janet Williams / Progressive Discoveries	<b>13</b>
About America’s Beauty Show	<b>14</b>
About Pivot Point International	<b>15</b>

This summary captures insights from the Beauty Changes Lives (BCL) Cultural Intelligence Committee (CQC) roundtable. BCL is an industry 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on scholarships, mentorship and supporting the industry through a variety of programs and initiatives. The CQC focuses on strengthening the connection between people, culture, and business outcomes.

The roundtable was held during America's Beauty Show in Chicago and brought together industry leaders representing beauty/barber schools and salons.

The session was designed and moderated by Janet Williams of Progressive Discoveries, co-chairperson of the BCL CQC.

The primary goal of the roundtable was to explore the growing disconnect between beauty school education and real-world salon expectations—particularly during the critical transition from graduation to the first year in the workforce. The discussion focused on surfacing real-world gaps between salons and schools, identifying challenges affecting retention and success and building a shared understanding across the industry.

### **[LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PRESENTATION](#)**



The roundtable discussion surfaced a clear and consistent set of challenges that point to a broader structural issue within the industry. While stakeholders—schools and salons—approach the issue from different perspectives, the underlying themes are highly aligned.

At its core, the industry is not facing a talent shortage. Instead, it is navigating a breakdown in how talent is developed, transitioned and supported in the earliest stages of a career.

## **TOP ISSUES**

### **The transition from school to salon is broken**

The most critical point of failure occurs between graduation and the first year in the workforce. While students leave school with foundational technical skills, they are often unprepared for the pace, expectations and realities of a salon environment. The shift is abrupt—moving from a structured learning environment into a performance-driven business—without a clear or consistent bridge between the two.

### **Expectations are misaligned across stakeholders**

Students, schools and salons are operating with different assumptions about what “ready” looks like. Students often expect early success and flexibility, while salons expect productivity and immediate contribution. Schools, meanwhile, are focused on delivering required curriculum within constrained curriculum and timeframes. This misalignment creates tension at the very moment when alignment is most needed.

### **Leadership and culture drive retention—not just skill**

A key insight from the discussion is that early career success is less about technical ability and more about the environment professionals enter. Salons with strong leadership, clear expectations and supportive cultures are far more successful at developing and retaining talent. Conversely, a lack of structure, communication and mentorship often leads to early disengagement—regardless of skill level.

## **WHAT'S NEEDED**

### **Structured transition pathways**

The industry would benefit from more intentional and consistent systems that guide new professionals from education into employment. This includes clearer onboarding processes, defined early-career stages and better alignment between what is taught and what is expected.

### **Stronger mentorship and training systems**

Development cannot be left to chance. Structured training programs, supported mentorship and measurable progression are critical to helping new professionals build confidence and capability over time. These systems also create consistency across organizations and outcomes.

**Better communication of real-world expectations**

There is a need for greater transparency around what early careers actually look like—how income builds, how skills develop and what is required to succeed. Setting clear, realistic expectations—before and after graduation—can significantly reduce early frustration and attrition.

**Alignment between schools, salons and industry bodies**

Perhaps most importantly, the industry must work more collaboratively. Schools and salons often operate independently, yet success depends on shared outcomes. Stronger partnerships, shared language and aligned expectations would create a more cohesive and effective talent pipeline.

**UNDERLYING THEME**

The discussion ultimately reinforced a fundamental truth: the beauty industry is inherently human-centered.

Success is not driven by technical skill alone, but by the ability to connect, lead and build trust over time.

- Relationships are the foundation of income, retention and long-term success.
- Leadership determines how effectively talent is developed and supported.
- Emotional intelligence enables professionals to navigate clients, teams and real-world challenges.

The industry's greatest opportunity is not simply to improve training—but to better support people as they grow from potential into performance.



- **Rodrck Samuels** – Hair Lab Detroit Barber School (school)
- **Ken Washburn** – Wahl Barber Academy; Pivot Point Academy; Cosmetologists Chicago / America's Beauty Show (school)
- **Robert Passage** – Pivot Point International; Beauty Changes Lives; Cosmetologists Chicago / America's Beauty Show (school and professional market)
- **Larry Kane** – Jonathan Kane Salon & Spa; Cosmetologists Chicago / America's Beauty Show (salon)
- **Tony Gordon** – Gordon Salon; Cosmetologists Chicago / America's Beauty Show (salon)
- **Bonnie Conte** – Avalon Salon Spa; Professional Beauty Association (salon)
- **Daniel Johnson** – Green Beauty Community (association)
- **Lorrene Conino** - Salon Lorrene; Cosmetologists Chicago / America's Beauty Show (salon)
- **Hans Berkert** – Capelli Institute (school and salon)
- **Andreas Zafiriadis** – Salon Buzz (salon)
- **July Zafiriadis** – Salon Buzz (salon)
- **Susan Haise** – Edgeless Beauty (school and salon)
- **Janet Williams** – Progressive Discoveries (program designer / facilitator)
- **Steve Reiss** – Pivot Point International (program organizer)



## 1. MAJOR GAP: SCHOOL VS. SALON REALITY

The discussion made clear that schools are effective at developing **technical and creative skills**, but not full professional readiness.

### Salons, however, require a broader set of capabilities:

- Speed, time management and productivity
- Client consultation and communication
- Business awareness and contribution to revenue

This disconnect creates a fundamental gap in expectations and outcomes.

*“Schools graduate potential—not professionals.”*

*“You don’t come out of culinary school as a top chef—you come out as a good line cook.”*

*“You don’t know what you don’t know when you’re new to this industry.”*

The implication is clear: education is building a foundation, but not fully preparing individuals for the realities of professional practice.

## 2. MISALIGNED EXPECTATIONS (BOTH SIDES)

A central tension exists between what students expect and what salons require.

### Students often expect:

- Immediate success and income
- Creative freedom
- Rapid progression to independence (e.g., booth rental, ownership)

### Salons often expect:

- Job-ready professionals
- Speed and efficiency
- Immediate contribution

The reality is that professional mastery takes time, often years.

### Participants emphasized that new graduates should be viewed as being in an early stage of development:

- More comparable to college freshmen or sophomores
- Still developing maturity, discipline and real-world judgment
- Not yet ready for full independence

*“People train at different rates.”*

*“You’re not going to make real money right out of school—it builds over time.”*

*“There is so much they haven’t even come across yet because they haven’t been in it.”*

This misalignment creates frustration on both sides and contributes to early career instability and people leaving the industry.

### 3. THE “TRANSITION GAP” (CRITICAL FAILURE POINT)

The most significant breakdown occurs between graduation and the first year in the salon.

#### **New professionals are often unprepared for:**

- Real client expectations (very different from working on mannequins)
- The reality that income builds over time
- Time pressure and scheduling demands
- Workplace expectations and accountability
- Professional presentation and personal responsibility
- The physical demands of continuous (a full day’s) service
- The unpredictability and pace of salon life

#### **They also experience a shift from being part of a structured learning environment to operating more independently:**

- “You’re on stage” — working directly with clients
- Less structured support
- Greater accountability

*“The biggest gap is between what happens in school and what happens when they hit the salon.”*

*“When I left beauty school, I felt thrown into chaos.”*

*“Students are not prepared for the reality of what the salon actually feels like day to day.”*

*“Guests are very different than mannequins.”*

A key issue identified was the lack of structured transition systems or bridges between school and salon.

### 4. LEADERSHIP & CULTURE CAN BE A ROOT CAUSE

Retention challenges were widely viewed as a **leadership issue— not a talent issue.**

*“We’re not short on talent—we’re short on how leadership develops that talent.”*

#### **Participants emphasized that leadership skills are often underdeveloped.**

##### **Common issues include:**

- Weak onboarding and mentorship
- Poor communication and expectations
- Lack of clear career paths
- Limited transparency about business realities

Strong leadership, culture and structure were consistently identified as the difference between success and failure in early career development.

*“Leadership is what determines whether someone succeeds or leaves.”*

*“Being a great stylist doesn’t make you a great salon owner.”*

## 5. TRAINING & MENTORSHIP GAPS

There is a clear need for more structured and intentional development systems.

### Effective approaches include:

- Step-by-step progression (assistant → services → full clients)
- Measurable milestones and expectations
- Ongoing coaching and feedback
- Accountability and consistency

### Participants also emphasized the importance of mindset:

- New professionals need to have a growth mindset
- Understanding that discipline leads to long-term freedom

Without structure, new professionals are often left to navigate development on their own.

*“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with a team.”*

*“Being on your own means you don’t get to pull from the experience of people who have already made the mistakes.”*

## 6. COMMUNICATION & PEOPLE SKILLS DEFICIT

A major gap identified was in communication, confidence and interpersonal skills.

### New professionals often struggle with:

- Client consultations
- Handling conflict and feedback
- Building relationships
- Confidence in real-world environments

*“School didn’t prepare me for the real world.”*

*“Having a really solid communication foundation is non-negotiable.”*

*“Communication is everything—that’s who we are.”*

### Contributing factors include:

- Reduced in-person interaction (COVID impact)
- Over-reliance on digital communication

In a relationship-driven industry, these skills are often more important than technical ability.

## **7. UNREALISTIC INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media was identified as a significant driver of unrealistic expectations.

### **It promotes:**

- “Work less, earn more” narratives
- Rapid success and independence
- Overemphasis on creative work

### **But often ignores:**

- The importance of consistency and repetition
- The time required to build a client base
- The discipline required to succeed

*“The blind leading the blind.”*

*“Decisions are made in chat rooms.”*

### **Participants reinforced that success comes from:**

- Showing up consistently
- Working with as many clients as possible
- Using unbooked time productively
- Understanding and communicating their value

## **8. CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS ADD PRESSURE**

### **Client expectations continue to increase:**

- Speed and efficiency (e.g., shorter service times)
- High quality and consistency
- Professional interaction and experience

### **Participants emphasized that:**

- Clients are buying an experience and emotional outcome, not just a service
- Interpersonal skills are critical to success

*“The most important thing is the relationships.”*

*“As the world becomes more automated, the human connection becomes more valuable.”*

*“Clients follow because of the relationship.”*

### **This creates tension between:**

- Learning pace vs. performance expectations
- Individual development vs. client demand

## 9. ECONOMIC & STRUCTURAL PRESSURES

### Economic realities affect both sides:

#### Students:

- Financial pressure and student loans
- Need to generate income quickly
- Limited visibility into long-term earning potential

#### Salons:

- Training is a cost and an investment
- ROI may take years
- Not all salons are structured to support development

### This creates a difficult balance between:

- Short-term business needs
- Long-term talent development

## 10. EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

### New professionals face significant emotional challenges:

- Fear and lack of confidence
- Intimidation in salon environments
- Feeling unsupported or invisible
- Difficulty navigating workplace dynamics

*"I felt thrown into chaos."*

### Participants noted that:

- Emotional readiness is as important as technical skill
- Many are not prepared for the realities of the "real world"

This is a key driver of early attrition.

### Students need to understand they have control over their future, and having the right mindset is key:

*"Listening is one thing—applying it is another."*

*"You've been given the golden ticket—what you do with it is up to you."*



## 11. EDUCATION SYSTEM LIMITATIONS

### Structural limitations in education include:

- Fixed program hours—are we teaching to the test or the real world?
- Emphasis on technique over real-world application
- Limited exposure to true salon environments

### Suggested improvements:

- Real-world simulations
- Financial literacy and career planning
- Time management training

## 12. NEED FOR INDUSTRY ALIGNMENT

A broader theme emerged around fragmentation across the industry, the lack of awareness of our industry and the need to present ourselves as a “professional” career.

- Schools, salons and associations often operate in silos
- Expectations are inconsistent
- There is no shared definition of salon readiness

*“We are professionals just like any other industry—and we need to be treated that way.”*

*“There’s no awareness that there are people in our salons making more than attorneys or physicians.”*

### Participants discussed the opportunity to:

- Build stronger collaboration across the ecosystem
- Create shared standards and expectations
- Develop clearer pathways from education to employment
- Creating “contracts” or shared expectations between schools, salons and students
- Expanding the role of associations in alignment efforts

*“This is the business of beauty—not just the beauty business.”*



**Think Long-Term**

- Early career = your development stage—focus on learning, building, and growing—the results will follow
- Success takes time—no shortcuts
- Consistency, patience and effort drive results

**Don't Rush Independence**

- Avoid going solo too early
- Build skills, income and clientele first
- Pay your dues—this stage matters

**Be Part of a Team**

- Strong employers provide clients with training and support
- Teams accelerate learning and growth

**Find the Right Fit**

- Choose environments that align with your values
- Surround yourself with people who actively support your growth

**People Skills Matter Most**

- Communication and relationships drive success
- Emotional intelligence is critical

**Relationships = Income**

- Trust and retention build long-term earnings
- Repeat clients are your foundation

**Bring the Right Mindset**

- Energy, passion, coachability, professionalism
- Skill can be taught—mindset cannot

**Earn Flexibility**

- Work when demand exists (nights/weekends)
- Build your book → then gain control of your schedule

**Keep Learning**

- Growth continues beyond school
- Top professionals never stop improving

# BEAUTY CHANGES LIVES®

## About Beauty Changes Lives / Cultural Intelligence Committee

Beauty Changes Lives (BCL) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making careers in the beauty and wellness industry a first-choice through scholarships, mentorship and industry collaboration and thought leadership.

The BCL Cultural Intelligence Committee (CQC), co-chaired by industry leaders Jan Arnold and Janet Williams, focuses on advancing human-centered leadership and strengthening the connection between people, culture and business outcomes.



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### About Janet Williams / Progressive Discoveries

Janet Williams is the Founder of Progressive Discoveries and a longtime leader in the beauty, wellness, and barbering industry. Her career includes serving as Director of the Aveda Institute Washington DC and Senior Director of Operations Education for Dessange North America, giving her deep experience across education, salon operations, leadership, and culture. Today, Janet helps organizations close the gap between the culture they have and the culture they want by strengthening leadership clarity, aligning expectations, and creating better pathways from education into sustainable careers. She is also Co-Chair of the Beauty Changes Lives Cultural Intelligence Committee and creator of The Chatter, an industry intelligence brief for beauty, wellness, and barbering leaders.



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**About America’s Beauty Show**

For over 100 years, America’s Beauty Show (ABS), owned and produced by Cosmetologists Chicago, has been a leading professional beauty industry event, bringing together educators, salon professionals, students, brands and industry leaders for education, inspiration and collaboration.



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# PIVOT POINT®

## About Pivot Point International

Pivot Point International, a third-generation family-owned business, is a global leader in beauty education, dedicated to elevating the industry through curriculum, tools, and research. The organization supports schools, students and professionals worldwide, with a focus on improving career readiness and strengthening the connection between education and real-world success. Pivot Point works closely with leading industry organizations and is a founding partner of Beauty Changes Lives.



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