



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

March 31, 2026

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Elizabeth Teagarden



Moderated by
Moira Quinn



Featuring
Cathy Bessant



Featuring
Tracey Greene-
Washington



Featuring
Charolette Orbinger

Women's History Month Panel: "Women's Leadership Across Generations"

WOMEN WHO LEAD AND HOW THEY DO IT.

by **Marilynn Bowler**

The program entitled *Women's Leadership Across Generations*, presented at the Charlotte Rotary meeting on March 31st, found a ballroom packed with women and an equal number of men. Not only the topic but the moderator and three-woman panel were the "draw," and that combination provided a fascinating conversation.

Well-known, highly respected, beloved, and skilled media personality and businesswoman Moira Quinn served as moderator. Currently serving as COO and Sr. Vice President of Communications for Charlotte Center City Partners, Moira used her prior career years of on-air media interviewing skills at WBTV to keep the discussion on-topic and moving.

Introducing the panelists and appropriately using words like "dynamic," "remarkable," and "talented," Moira referred to the "struggles and successes we all have ... and we have our villages to lift us up." The workplace is a true study of this poignant statement and the combination of Cathy Bessant, former Bank of America executive and now CEO of the Foundation for the Carolinas; Tracey Greene-Washington, President of Indigo Innovation Group and a leader in strategic philanthropy; and Charolette Orbinger, COO-Corporate of Medi-

Weightloss and founding investor behind Heron House, beautifully represented an expert and inclusive group to discuss how women navigate "second chapters and challenges."

Cathy Bessant spoke first, sharing the steps in her background that led her from a degree from the University of Michigan with a plan to go to law school to her amazing banking career ... calling her years at Bank of America "ten different careers with one business card." Those years in banking found her leading areas including small business, consumer, and large corporate as well as technology and operations. Her eventual decision to leave BofA was - in her words - "right for the organization I loved which was new leadership and what was right for me which was to be complete with the next chapter." She specifically lauded Hugh McColl and Brian Moynihan for their leadership, expertise, guidance, support and friendship.

Tracey Greene-Washington spoke next, highlighting her hugely successful twenty-five-year career in philanthropy at organizations like the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, and Nexus Point Consulting before doing the unexpected, which was to take a sabbatical for a year. As Moira said, "Tracey, that took courage. Tell us how you did it and why." Tracey's answer was thoughtful and provocative. She said she had found herself asking herself, "Am I doing the right work, in the right place, and in the right way?" Profoundly, she began thinking about her legacy, i.e.: "Am I successful?" and "What is significance?" She wisely addressed those questions to a circle of close and trusted friends and shared her thoughts regarding a transition in careers and a new chapter. The end result, after much consideration, was a major career decision which, in her words, "gave me the space to experiment and explore what the next phase could be." The first of three stipulations of her plan was: 1) Serve on three Boards: the NC Center for Public Policy Research, EducationNC, and the NC Early Childhood Foundation. "That was non-negotiable." The second stipulation was to go to Italy for a week, where she attended the Aspen Global Leadership Summit and spent those days discussing relevant issues with leaders from across the country. Her third stipulation was participating in a job interview for a foundation president role. Upon her return from sabbatical, she found people reaching out to her, inviting her back in, as she put it. That resulted in the founding of her consulting firm, along with "partnering with different leaders and organizations, doing a TEDx talk, and writing a book."

Charolette Obringer spoke of her career in regional and national retail ~ inclusive of Old Navy, Gap, American Eagle Outfitters, LensCrafters, Belk ~ leading teams in both traditional retail and operations by building teams, creating SOPs, teaching efficient operations. In her words, she was learning and growing, but realized she wasn't "stretching" herself. She didn't feel she was being challenged and felt a desire for something new. Charolette made the decision to find a more socially meaningful career, which would allow her to help an organization "grow and scale while also improving people's lives." Happily, at Medi-Weightloss ~ a system of medical weight loss clinics owned by franchisees ~ she works with patients at over one hundred and thirty locations.

Moira introduced the topic of "Barriers," and each of our panelists weighed in with interesting insights, all three saying that they were raised to believe they could do anything. The barriers they noted included the fact that they were addressing Boards comprised of people across the table who didn't look like them (meaning they were women presenting to men); they were people of color; families, well-being, mental health and social networking didn't exist in earlier times of their careers; and "If I'm direct or urgent, I'm labeled as 'aggressive'."

Cathy summed it up well: "Building trust and relationships" is key to any successful career, both for women and for men. She said, "Trust is the foundation. It's the roux in the gumbo. You have to have it." Challenges should be met with how best to control the obstacles and how to respond to them. "Every problem has a solution. If one approach isn't working, try another way. And stay curious. Work hard, stay committed, and find a way through. And don't give up."

Cathy's final message for women and men: Feel and demonstrate empathy.

"Empathy is emotional intelligence." That's brilliant!

The recording can be found here:

With slides: [Women's History Month Panel | Women's Leadership Across Generations with slides](#)

Without slides: [Women's History Month Panel | Women's Leadership Across Generations without slides](#)

The program introduction begins at about 26 minutes 40 seconds.