




BEST PRACTICES

Why diversity matters in construction

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SUMMARY

6 tips for a successful DEI program. Learn how fostering diversity and inclusion can enhance company culture and performance in the construction industry.

2020 was a year of significant protests against systematic racial and social injustices that has now, years later, resulted in tangible changes. Tens of thousands of

companies across the United States took a look at their own business practices and made public commitments to improving diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) among their workforces.



While DEI has become an unfortunate political target in 2023, diversity and inclusion simply means including, supporting, and accepting the full range of human differences and experiences in the workforce.

This includes everything from race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical abilities, to religious or ethical values systems, national origins, and political beliefs.

Diversity and inclusion programs—when properly facilitated—have a direct impact on employee morale, your company identity, and ultimately your bottom line. Diverse management has been shown to increase revenue by 19%, and produce happier employees, which leads to a better culture and lower turnover.

Why DEI is important in the construction industry

It's clear though that there is a lot more work to be done. Construction Dive surveyed its readers as to their own experiences on construction jobsites. In response, 65% said they had witnessed a racist incident ranging from verbal abuse/slurs to the posting or placement of racist symbols. Some 42% said they had seen outwardly racist graffiti at jobsites, while 38% had witnessed racist language used. Twenty five percent reported refusals to hire a worker because of their race, while 31% noted workers being given undesirable tasks due to their race. Meanwhile, 15% of respondents reported seeing nooses or other racist objects placed at or near construction sites.

Of these incidents, 70% of respondents said nothing was done to address them. In terms of potential reasons for racist acts, readers surmised that everything from high-stress environments to relatively low numbers of minority workers on some jobsites leave offending groups feeling more emboldened. Regardless, most respondents noted that any racist actions in construction needed to be weeded out.



Jennifer Tolwinski, controller with DKD Electric LLC shared her own experiences as a woman of color in construction in a Q&A blog with Trimble Viewpoint. She had to

work harder to prove herself in her professional career because of preexisting biases. “Just like with any major change, it takes a lot of time,” Tolwinski said. A lot of times, change occurs from generation to generation. So I think it’s important right now to start showing the current generation and future generations why there needs to be change.”

6 tips for developing a construction DEI program

Trimble Viewpoint has been fortunate to host a number of experts on this subject over the years at our conferences, including sessions that examined the challenges the industry has faced, personal stories and strategies to improve equality across the board.



“I don’t know of any partner in the HR world that feels like their work is done in this area and it’s a calling to do more work,” [Sellen Construction’s](#) Kate Harkess, senior vice president and director of HR, said during one session, “Top Tips for Building a Diverse and Inclusive Workplace” (embedded below, for those interested in watching).

Below are six key takeaways from Harkess and Fran O’Sullivan, CFO of [Dome Construction](#) on how to find success with your own DEI programs:

1. Understand your company's existing identities

Helping your employees understand their racial, gender, sexual and other identities and how they impact their own experiences is a vital step to success. It's also good to understand your company's current makeup of different identity types to see where strengths and shortfalls lie.

2. Be clear on the "Why"—both personally and from a business perspective

Why is the company putting together a diversity and inclusion program? What are the end goals and benefits? Being able to easily articulate these in ways that your workforce can understand is critical to success. O'Sullivan, for instance, noted her company's DEI program was presented as a positive way to address labor gaps and shortfalls in the industry. "You need to communicate, communicate, communicate at every level," Harkess added. "Not only the why, but the benefits and the payoffs.

3. Buy-in from company management and leaders is an absolute

"This really has to come from the top down," O'Sullivan said. "They have to set the bar and they have to drive this. It's very difficult to be successful without that." Of course, companies' own workforces can influence leadership as well by advocating for more diversity and inclusion measures.

4. Time, resources and funding are needed to make DEI efforts work

As O'Sullivan notes, "this isn't something that people will do on the side or in committees" that are beyond the scope of their regular work. D&I efforts need to be a pivotal part of employees' everyday work. That means finding the time and resources—including funding—to make these efforts stick.

5. Don't be afraid to ask for help

Trying to put these programs together alone or in a pre-existing bubble may not yield the results you're looking for. Make sure all of your employees' voices are represented in the process and look to outside experts or consulting firms with experience in diversity and inclusion to help fill in the blanks you might not have thought of. Looking to "those that have journeyed down this path before is so critical," Harkess said.

6. Don't make this a one-off effort

For diversity and inclusion programs to work, information needs to be consistently communicated, procedures and tasks supported throughout the company, and the D&I plan regularly reevaluated to make sure it's effective. Benchmark your work and progress. Keep solid track of your D&I efforts at all levels and continually analyze what's working and what's not.

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