

A Look at Diversity and Inclusion from Inside the Construction Industry

Written by:

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Over the past few years, there has been a sense of heightened awareness on the need for diversity and inclusion in an industry that has been largely dominated by a particular group or class of people. Ever since I learned the phrase “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance,” by Verna Myers, I have been pondering how it relates to both my professional and personal life experiences in the construction industry. In sharing the why and how that phrase relates, I share a personal perspective different from the academic theory on “Diversity and Inclusion.”

Companies are emphasizing the importance of “Diversity and Inclusion” not only as a business case, but as part of their core values. Some even go as far as adding “equity.” The trending discussions on “Diversity and Inclusion” have many excited, and yes, some celebrate this new opening in an industry that has been relatively closed. And the question around this new opening is, *Do some of these companies really mean to pass off “tokenism” as “Diversity and Inclusion?” Are the contributions these different “shades” bring to the table respected and valued as significant or essential to the progress and advancement of their organization?*

A few years ago, as the construction industry started trending more toward “Diversity and Inclusion,” we saw more women in leadership across the industry, and we cheered the shift. I even bought my pink steel toe boots as part of the celebration. Unfortunately, that change was largely limited to women from a particular “shade.” Although there were a few others, particular “shades” were still mostly left out.

I cannot tell you how many conferences I attended over the years labeled as a “diverse and inclusive” panel, only to find one particular “shade” of women, and on rare occasions, I found someone of a slightly darker “shade.” There is no representation of the diverse shades of people in construction. The reason I hear is, *“The pool of qualified women is limited; we can’t seem to find qualified women in a particular shade...”* Of course, so many women of diverse shades enter the industry and then find

themselves acting as spectators rather than the valuable actors they envisioned. The exclusion from activities and decision-making led many to exit the industry.

The need for “Diversity and Inclusion” in the industry is a big deal! It is more than having representation of different “shades” to demonstrate a company’s social responsibility and awareness. Instead, it is engaging and supporting those different “shades” to succeed with shared power and equity.

Everyone has a unique role to play in promoting “Diversity and Inclusion” in the industry. Yes, there is the educational component, but there is a human component that requires empathy, compassion, and respect for those outside your “shade.” My perspective is unique, no one else has my exact background, environment, and life circumstances, and how it has shaped my thinking, my actions, and overall, my character. This is the special something everyone brings to the table as part of diversity. That value can never be tapped for the benefit of the organization if not given the opportunity and respected as a valuable contribution to the team.

Company policies may mandate diversity, but without inclusivity and equity, it is nothing more than “tokenism.” It is humanity that enables inclusion.

I have been in the industry for more than 30 years, but I never felt included until about six years ago. It took effort and intentionality on the part of others to include me. I attended a couple of industry events, but always felt like the odd kid at the cool kid’s party. That changed with Natalie Saylor and Craig Unger acting as “allies” in extending gestures of respect and acknowledgment for the valuable contribution that comes with my “difference.”

Natalie and Craig did not facilitate my participation on the CMAA Northern California Chapter Board or the DBIA Awards Jury solely because I was black, but because of the different perspective of value that I bring to the team. Through this inclusion, I went on to forge lasting and meaningful relationships beyond the CMAA NorCal BOD and DBIA Awards Jury. Nihan Tiryaki and I quickly formed a strong bond and collaborated on many initiatives. We even won the 2017 CMAA Northern California President’s Award as the Dynamic Duo! Four years later, we are still collaborating on the Shades in Construction initiative. For me, that depicts the power of “Diversity and Inclusion.”

I use my personal experience to illustrate a point. If we are truly serious about changing the industry to be more “Diverse and Inclusive” there must be a mental reset as we disabuse ourselves of any concept or idea of “tokenism” for the sole purpose of political or economic correctness. We must act with empathy, intentionality, and determination to make a change for moral and social consciousness.

We of all “shades” must be willing to have those difficult conversations openly and respectfully, without judgement or condemnation, but rather to educate and breakdown those impeding systems we did not create. Through these dialogues, we will better understand the unique challenges facing the different “shades” in the industry.

The strategy for a more “Diverse and Inclusive” industry is different from other sectors; it cannot be a “one size fits all.” Instead, policies and action plans must be holistic and granular enough to include cultural intelligence and understanding. We need more than educational training, conferences, captivating PowerPoints and videos, or monetary investment. We need more empathy, understanding, accountability, social and moral consciousness, and willingness to invest ourselves emotionally. We must

identify our role either as an “ally” or “accomplice” and serve passionately in that role for the desired change.

I’ll end with one of my favorite quotes by Steve Jobs, “Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.” We have a collective responsibility to ensure “Diversity and Inclusion” not only looks and feels right to our organizations, but that it works right for all the different shades of people in the industry.

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