

# Why Diversity Matters in Construction and 6 Tips to Successful DEI Programs



More and more construction companies are ramping up diversity and inclusion efforts among their workforces - especially as social justice movements gained significant steam across the world in 2020.

While 2020 may be remembered as the year of COVID, it was also a significant year of protests against systematic racial and social injustices that resulted in real, tangible changes. Among them, 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.

Diversity and inclusion at its most basic concept means truly accepting, supporting and including the full range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical abilities, religious or ethical values systems, national origins and political beliefs. Diversity and inclusion programs — when properly facilitated — have a direct impact on your employees, your company identity and ultimately your bottom line. Happier employees that feel more valued and included tend to be more collaborative and productive.

## A Chief Focus for the Construction Industry



Jennifer Tolwinski of DKD Electric shared her own experiences as a woman of color in the construction industry with Viewpoint, noting that positive changes can be made with the right commitment.

The construction industry, like many others, has faced challenges with diversity, equity and inclusion. Recent years though have seen both industry associations and individual contractors take significant action to stamp out racism, sexism and other blights. And, some good progress has been made on that front.

It's clear though that there is a lot more work to be done. In August, [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 that 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 Construction Diversity and Inclusion Programs



A key part of inclusiveness is making sure all of your employees' voices are both heard and represented in your D&I plans.

With equity, diversity and inclusion being a key theme of 2020 on the whole, Trimble Viewpoint featured two sessions at our [Collaborate 2020 conference](#) devoted to diversity, equity and inclusion 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."

Below are six key takeaways from that session with 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.

Watch the full panel session here for more great advice and discussions on DEI in the construction industry:

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