

# Peer Silence Speaks Loud

In recent weeks, large corporations have come forth, acknowledging the need for change and inclusion in the workplace. Yet the construction sector has remained mute. As a black woman contractor-owner who loves the industry, the silence of my peers speaks volumes. The lack of conversation may lead some to believe the problem is bigger than we think.

My construction journey began when I was hired by Urban Metro Development, a top black-owned environmental contractor at the time. I took on every role I could—receptionist estimator, field supervisor, project manager and vice president. Working at the firm was a great learning experience. The



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management team was racially diverse, and more than 30% of field managers were women. So when I launched my firm, LMS General Contractors, I didn't understand the gravitas of being a double minority, a black woman, in a traditionally white, male-dominated industry. Advancing through racism and sexism can be exhausting.

## Racism and Microaggressions

Sadly, I've been subjected to both over the past 12 years. I've been called racial slurs by other contractor representatives. I've been locked out of my own project site for "my safety" and had my equipment fuel lines cut in the middle of the night. A Las Vegas casino even told me a check could not be issued "because the casino ran out of paper."

Despite the trials, I still believe in the construction industry. A few years ago, I was the youngest black woman to acquire a California CSLB General Engineering (A)

license. To enhance my business, I earned a law degree with a corporate focus from Arizona State University. But it was not enough.

To get noticed by large contractors, I had to acquire certifications. Due to lack of diversity, black and minority companies are generally forced to rely on affirmative action, DBE goals and small-business and local program certifications to join the team. Often, we aren't gifted with relationships, mentorships or industry resources to help foster our businesses. We don't tend to receive invites to Christmas parties, fishing trips or golf tournaments.

With industry revenue in the billions, it's still uncommon to see black multigenerational corporations created, sold to larger companies or driven by investors to go public. As the gap widens, minority businesses continue to socially and economically work from behind. Companies owned and led by blacks and women are largely absent from well-read lists of top construction industry firms. The implicit bias in construction is evidenced through lack of diversity in ownership, leadership, management and the field. Diversity goals can't be met with single hires or by naming a woman of color as diversity and inclusion coordinator.

For firms that are sincere in their desire for change and inclu-

sion, it starts at the top and must be witnessed at every level.

## Black Companies = Black Jobs

Construction's labor shortage remains critical. Inclusion allows for industry growth and adds to urban viability. More to the point, black companies create job opportunities for black people and other people of color. For over a decade, I've hired and trained men and women with an 87% success rate. The more opportunities I obtain, the more people I help out of poverty, provide for families and learn a trade through long-term employment.

For firms and vendors to be authentic allies who support diversity, thoughtful approaches to accompany actionable steps are needed. To see a culture change, they must be accountable for diversity commitments in hiring employees, leaders, subcontractors and vendors. Top companies create the narrative and trends that others follow. They especially need to ask themselves the hard questions.

How many black contractors, minority contractors and women contractors were hired last year? In the past five years? Does the company go out of its way to hire only those who look like them or seem familiar? Do its culture and team reflect inclusiveness?

Construction industry leaders have talked about the importance of diversity and inclusion. Now is the time to show it. Change begins where our comfort level ends. ■

*Jennifer Todd is owner-president of LMS General Contractors Inc., a certified woman- and minority-owned and operated GC-CM firm that self-performs demolition and emergency cleanup and remediation. She can be reached at jtodd@lmsgc.com.*

If you have an idea for a column, please contact Viewpoint Editor Richard Korman at [kormanr@enr.com](mailto:kormanr@enr.com).