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With the emergence from the pandemic and a continuing crisis with workforce development on every level, the old issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion is reaching a tipping point. I would also add the concept of belonging to this list. It's high time that we create a culture where folks are clamoring to be a part of this amazing industry.

Let's continue the meaningful dialogue in order to create a shift in our traditional ways of doing business and embark on an entirely new way of working. It is time for everyone to dig deeply and focus on this issue. It is time for all sides commit to a proactive approach with compromise and cooperation in mind. It is time that we meet in the middle and figure out how to use a more diverse workforce to create better projects and better business results while helping to solve our workforce development crisis.

I have attended many industry events as we emerge from the pandemic, and the demographics are a little shocking. As wonderful as our industry is, these events are filled with mostly middle-aged, white men. Don't get me wrong. I love middle aged white men. I AM a middle-aged white man. But If I were a woman or a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color), I would take one look at the demographic and think twice about my participation in this industry. I would be concerned not only about how I would be treated and potentially excluded consciously or unconsciously, but I would be concerned about my career mobility as well. If these are the leaders in the industry, where are the folks who look like me?

We all know that women and BIPOC participation is quite low, and the effort to be more inclusive to women and BIPOC, although much better than 10 years ago, is limited at best. There are several reasons for this: a lack of role models for women and BIPOC, wage disparity (although construction does better than corporate America), the current culture of the industry, lack of focus on career mobility when women and BIPOC enter the workforce, and lack of understanding and connection among all these groups.

There is some good news. Several companies and industry organizations are reaching out to young people, especially women and BIPOC, through a variety of workforce development initiatives. The ACE Mentoring Program is one, and it has been very successful in promoting the construction industry as a viable career. But since this is a more long-term solution, we

must be more aggressive in our approach to realize some much-needed short-term results.

If all industry organizations and companies would commit to some very simple initiatives, we could improve diversity dramatically in a relatively short period of time:

Provide education and information. Reach out to the many women and BIPOC organizations throughout the construction industry and court them, let them know that they are welcome. Invite their members to the currently white, male dominated events and give them the spotlight. Create an open dialogue. We need to learn more about each other, and the best way to do that is to get everyone in the same room. This will help to shift the industry image from one of exclusion to one of inclusion.

Provide meaningful training for all the white guys. I don't mean "diversity" training or "sensitivity" training. These tend to only provide the legal requirements to keep from being sued. I'm talking about training that creates true understanding and trust. We need to explode biases, stereotypes, and preconceptions from all sides of this equation and create an atmosphere of cooperation, trust, and comfort. All sides need to tell their stories and we must listen without judgment and create connection and compassion. We need to hear each other's experiences and embrace them. Let's talk about the struggles of women and BIPOC folks in the industry. Let's also talk about the astronomical suicide rate in the industry with 70% of suicides being white males of working age. Let's explore each of our struggles in an effort to better understand each other.

Provide meaningful training for all women and underrepresented groups. Give them the tools they need to navigate this maze of construction. Successful women and BIPOC in the industry know this navigation, and these skills are teachable and learnable. We must use this knowledge to create programs that teach these skills to maximize the success of women and BIPOC. We must also provide them with a community so that they feel supported and have an avenue to share with each other.

Start looking for ways to promote capable woman and BIPOC to higher levels of management. When you hire women and BIPOC, lay out their career path for them and show them that they can work their way into top positions in your company.

Take a look at your website, social media, and marketing materials. When folks learn about your company, they will visit these internet spots. What will they see? Will they see mostly white men in leadership roles and in all your company photos? If the answer is yes, you probably have some work to do.

There is a very real business case for these inclusion initiatives: