

# Mortenson and five other industry giants make national push for diversity in construction

- According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 90% of construction employees are male, and two thirds are white.

By Dee DePass, Star Tribune

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, Minneapolis-based Mortenson Construction and five other national builders will launch the first industrywide Construction Inclusion Week in October in hopes of bringing more diversity to the industry.

The inaugural event will run Oct. 18-22 with participation by scores of construction firms across the country.

Most are expected to host job site and online events, educational meetings, goal-setting sessions and social media campaigns designed to help construction executives adopt best practices for hiring more women and minority employees and more diverse suppliers.

Daily discussion topics include leadership and accountability, unconscious bias, supplier diversity, job site culture and community outreach and philanthropy.

The new effort is a start at making positive change in the industry for generations of workers to come, said Dan Johnson, chief executive and president of Mortenson, which has built such projects as U.S. Bank Stadium, Target Field, the Minnesota State Senate Building and the Mall of America expansion.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 90% of construction workers are male and two-thirds are white. About 30% are Hispanic, 6% are Black and 2% are Asian.

"Our industry can be more diverse," said Tia Perry, director of inclusion, diversity and equity at the trade group Associated Builders and Contractors. "It's important that we represent everyone from a diversity standpoint. There is this huge shortage of workers and so we have to really look at underrepresented communities to ensure we are inclusive of everyone."

Construction Inclusion Week is the latest effort created by large firms such as Microsoft, Target Corp., Best Buy Co. and others looking to improve racial equity in employment and management as part of a national reckoning sparked by Floyd's killing last year.

The construction-focused initiative is the brainchild of a six-member consortium of builders called "It's Time For Change."

The group has a combined annual billing of more than \$40 billion globally. In addition to Mortenson, members are: Rhode Island-based Gilbane Building Co., California-based DPR Construction, New York-based Turner Construction, Missouri-based McCarthy Building Cos., and Maryland-based Clark Construction Group.

Each has its own diversity programs. But combining efforts will help other industry players create their own "pathway," Mortenson's Johnson said, so that workers and managers of all backgrounds will feel welcomed and provided with career advancement opportunities.

"We want generational and sustainable change that perpetuates more than one year," he said. "So far we've seen an unbelievable reception of folks wanting to be part of this."

Mortenson, with \$5 billion in annual construction projects, hired its first diversity coaches in 2015. It conducted unconscious bias training for managers, and started a high school internship program to introduce young women and people of color to the skilled trades.

Today, 40% of Mortenson's workforce is comprised of women and people of color.

"We feel really good about that," Johnson said, "But I also want to be honest about where we are as a business industry. We are not where we need to be."

Johnson added that he knows the topic can be divisive.

"Only about 3% of the craft workers in the United States are women. And still to this day, 63% of the craft workers are white. So we have a long way to go."

Following nationwide protests in the summer of 2020 about racial inequities, consortium executives met by conference call and talked about the need to improve jobs, career and educational opportunities for women, Blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans looking to enter the construction trades. The CEOs shared their best practices and wanted to encourage other construction firms to do likewise.

Associated Builders and Contractors is now heavily promoting the inclusion week

to 7.4 million construction workers. It will also host daily webinars and Ted Talks for participants.

New Brighton-based APi Group, which installed fire suppression, sprinklers and other specialty building equipment in Target Field and the Essentia Health Hospital in Duluth, is launching online training modules called "Cultural Fluency" and "Inclusion Begins with I," for several thousand APi leaders.

"When we learned that there was going to be this annual Inclusion Week, our chief executive was all in," said Velma Korbel, who was hired as APi's first diversity, equity and inclusion officer in November.

Lester Royal, chief operating officer and co-owner of Black-owned TRI Construction firm in Minneapolis, said he hopes the initiative will be "impactful" and generate more "genuine and authentic mentorships between large general contractor firms and smaller minority- and women-owned firms."

If the idea catches on, it could spur more large builders to adopt five-year growth plans for their minority-owned subcontractors. If done well, it could bring "more intentional and lasting impact versus being just a sporadic movement," said Royal.

Mortenson's Johnson said such partnerships are important for firms such as TRI, which is rebuilding parts of Lake Street and West Broadway in Minneapolis and the Midway shopping area in St. Paul following last year's devastating riots.

TRI, which partnered with Mortenson on its U.S. Bank Stadium project and built out Mortenson's stadium office across the street, has 40 employees, 80% of which are people of color.

Construction Inclusion Week is modeled after National Safety Week, which was started in 2014 by 40 construction firms hoping to reduce worker accidents and train builders about best practices. Safety Week is now an annual mainstay at construction firms nationwide.

Dee DePass  
dee.depass@startribune.com  
612-673-7725