



Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to the Mobile Workforce podcast. I am your host, Mike Merrill. Today we are sitting down with Leon Harden, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategy Manager at Burns and McDonnell, which is a full service construction and engineering firm with the legacy and construction dating all the way back to 1898. Pretty crazy, over 120 years. In today's episode, we're going to talk about why diversity, equity, and inclusion should be a priority for your construction business, the types of DEI goals that you should have on each project and also the results that Leon has experienced on how to go about recruiting for a diverse workforce. Hello Leon, thank you for joining us on the podcast today. Glad to have you.

Leon Harden:

Mike, thanks so much for having me on the show. Looking forward to the conversation.

Mike Merrill:

Awesome. I am too. So why don't you just kick off and tell us what exactly is diversity, equity, and inclusion? What does it mean and why is it important for construction companies to embrace?

Leon Harden:

What I view diversity, equity, and inclusion is, diversity is about who's there, who is on site, who is supporting your projects. Then, when we think about equity, it's really those things that we're doing proactively to make sure that we're reaching everybody that we need to and going the extra effort and being intentional about developing relationships with those voices that haven't traditionally been heard on job sites or in construction sites or in board rooms. And from an inclusion standpoint, really that's about showing that representation in an empathetic way, making sure that we're having those conversations, showing representation, telling stories to show who's here and

how they got here, and what that might mean for how they work and how they support the projects that you may be working on.

Mike Merrill:

That's great. That's helpful. So tell me, what are a couple of examples of specific DEI initiatives that you've been involved with?

Leon Harden:

So far with Burns and McDonnell, this is a new venture for us. I've been in my role for about eight months and it's really focused on the people side of things, and this is the first time that we've ever done it. We've had a pretty robust business diversity program for the last 17 years. Since 2004, we saw a need to really focus on that and make sure that we were compliant from a federal standpoint. Then that sort of evolved into all of these great efforts that have happened over the last 17 years and that's inclusive of all the supplier inclusion awards that we've won, inclusive of all of the minority and small and women-owned businesses that we've supported and tried to get to support our projects. And so, for me, some of the initiatives on the people side has really been about that storytelling piece of it.

Leon Harden:

We created a series called Stories of Us which talks about a myriad of things. We tackled everything from George Floyd to Memorial Day to the exit in Afghanistan, to actually someone on our job site, on our construction job site, who've recently transitioned in the LGBT community. So we've tackled quite a bit of stuff. It's a really great thing to use people's stories and make sure that we're showing representation of who we actually are. So for me, over the last eight months has been a collection of efforts, understanding who we are as an organization, and then starting to, now that we know current state, we're going to start to get even better.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome. What are some examples of maybe how DEI has benefited your organization within the construction industry?

Leon Harden:

We hire 1,700 ... well, somewhere between 1,000 and 1,700 people as full-time employees in our organization every year. A lot of that is new grads, some of that is interns, so I guess those wouldn't be full-time. But we knew early on based on our growth targets, that we had to be very intentional about who we were recruiting and where we were recruiting. So we have expanded our tent quite a bit. That means going to diversity career fairs. That's SWE, which is a Society of Women Engineers; going to NSBE, which is the National Society of Black Engineers; going to Ship, and several other diverse conferences throughout the country to make sure that we've built a brand and that we're invested in those organizations so that they know Burns and Mac and we'll work with Burns and Mac within their career.

Leon Harden:

That's been a big part of what we've been doing from the recruitment standpoint. And I think as an organization we've been around for a long time, we've been employee-owned for almost 40 years. For us, we've doubled in size from 3,000 or 4,000 people to now we're almost 8,500. And so, what that's meant for us is that now that we've been able to figure out this recruitment thing and pull people in, we need to spend time developing them. So, talent initiatives are really the next phase for us, which is to start looking at who's here, look at who's prepared for leadership, and then start to make intentional changes in how we develop people to make sure that there's a pipeline for board members, for officers, for principles and associates all the way on down. So that's the next phase of our sort of DE&I evolution.

Mike Merrill:

I think when I hear you talk about that, I think it's very interesting that you are tapping into a pool of hires that other companies obviously are not, so I think that's fantastic.

Leon Harden:

That's a thing. I mean, we're a big company. We're 8,500 people, right? Not every organization's going to be able to tap into every single association or society, but get hyper-local. Get to a place where you know where there's talent and spend time there. I think that, and the wake of all of this change and intentionality with some of the companies that are coming through, I think people are starting to be able to smell the BS a little bit when people are checking the box. So taking the time to get really intentional about the relationships that you're building within your community to give people jobs or let them earn jobs and be on sites, I think is really important.

Mike Merrill:

That's amazing. I can imagine with that large of a workforce, you've got to obviously have a lot of balance and you've got to do a lot of things uniquely to keep that many people employed and busy and remain profitable. So obviously being employee-owned, your staff also must like these initiatives because they're a part of what's making the decision to move this direction. Is that accurate?

Leon Harden:

Yeah. Our business is hungry for it, and especially as most of our growth has happened in our regional offices, outside of Kansas City over the last couple of years. We're really starting to see this coast mentality and sort of more of a progressive side of things, push us even further. So when you look at like some of our larger offices in Houston and Atlanta and our Southern California offices, they're really going, "We need to move the needle. We need to be better. We need to start investing in these things." Our headquarters is absolutely behind this as well, but we're trying to mirror what the demographics are in all of the places in which we live, work, and play.

Mike Merrill:

I think that's great too. I love that you're plugging into the community that you're serving when you do that. What are some goals that construction companies that maybe haven't had this kind of an initiative in the past should have for plugging into this diversity and inclusion initiative like you have?

Leon Harden:

I would say to start by evaluating who you are as an organization and what your intention is. My goal, for example, is to interweave diversity, equity, and inclusion into everything that we do. So taking stock of your business and what you want to accomplish is a number one, and deciding what that means for what your next step is set. For me, setting goals wasn't necessarily the first thing I wanted to do. I think sometimes when we think about goals, there's A, B, and C. And if you do those three things, then you've check marked one diversity. This is more of a journey and a roadmap than something that you do and it's over and we solved it. So it's really important to look around, understand what you want to accomplish, and start to be intentional in your efforts to make things happen.

Workforce is a tricky thing. You can't control people like they're widgets. You may have fluctuation in your workforce which caused you to not be able to hit some of those goals, and that can be discouraging. We want to make sure that you're building long term, long lasting relationships with a pipeline of candidates. Candidates that are from underrepresented communities, candidates that are coming from nontraditional schooling or nontraditional roles that they've had in the past, and really expanding that tent to make sure that you're capturing the best of the best in market.

Mike Merrill:

That's a great answer. So tell me this, when you're, say you're in a smaller organization, a smaller contractor listening to this, how can they best start and how does that differ from what maybe a larger company might start with?

Leon Harden:

I think that you've got to start a little smaller and start listening to what your employees want. One of the things that you can do as a smaller organization is get a group of five to 10 people that work for you if you're that small or maybe smaller, if you're even smaller than that, which is fine. And start to create maybe a diversity committee and talk about what people want and where they might be able to find talent. Because even if you're a small organization, if you have one

person leading the charge, it's not going to work. You have to get buy in from everybody around you and everybody has to be marching to the same drum beat. Otherwise, it's going to fail. I always say, it's not Leon Harden's diversity program. It is each one of you who is out in the community who is going to make this successful. That's why you have to plug into that network, plug into people who know where talent is, and lean on them to help guide the direction in which you want to go.

Mike Merrill:

That's great. When we talk about diversity and inclusion, what type of candidates are you talking about? What are some places that you might look for, some of those underrepresented groups to hire from?

Leon Harden:

I think that trade schools are a great place for craft workers and et cetera. I think community colleges, technical colleges, are places that we're starting to evaluate. We're even starting to look at ways that we could even build a school that is like a Burns and Mac University to help facilitate kids at junior or senior in high school so that they understand what it means to be on a construction site and they understand what kind of money they can make, and that this can be a long-lasting career. So I would say that that's a great place to start. I think, looking at places like NABWIC, there's one in Houston, which is National Association of Black Women in Construction. Getting connected to those types of partnerships are really critical to the success of where you're going.

Mike Merrill:

That's great. So there's organizations that exist out there already. It sounds like there's organizations for black women in construction. I know NAWIC is one that we've had some guests from NAWIC. Do you guys hire from their groups?

Leon Harden:

I believe so in various location. I couldn't tell you specifically. We're looking at building out that partnership with one of our ERGs this year.

Mike Merrill:

That's great. I think this initiative is very worthwhile and it's great to hear that, especially large companies like yours, are out there doing this impactful work and allowing again, these underrepresented communities to not only have a voice but also plug in and make a great living in an industry that is thriving. People are well-paid these days in construction. Is that what you're seeing as well?

Leon Harden:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the fight for talent or the war for talent is only going to get stronger over time as we see sort of the generational gap that happens. We had a conversation, I looked around the room, and everybody was of a certain age. They're like, "How do we transfer our knowledge to the next generation?" That is the biggest challenge that needs to happen because people don't think about construction as a lifelong career, but it truly is. Coming out of school, you can make a lot more money than your peers if you're doing it right. So I would definitely say, get creative in the way that you look for talent and don't feel like you have to get it right on every single time. This is all uncharted territory for a lot of people, so go in with a little bit of grace, be prepared to be uncomfortable, be prepared to say things wrong, because I do it all the time, and don't be afraid to fail.

Mike Merrill:

That's great advice as well. We actually had a guest on, six or so months ago, named Letitia Hanke. She started a foundation called the LIME Foundation and she's got a program in California where she is recruiting and training high school students in the roofing trade. And so, really cool stuff. They've got some young ladies that are in that program also, and they get to cherry pick and hire some. Then they're also training employees for other organizations in the valley where they have these schools. So really cool stuff and always makes us happy to hear that people are getting creative and plugging into these underutilized resources that our industry certainly needs.

Leon Harden:

I would also add to that. A lot of municipalities have initiatives that are happening within their own

communities. If you look at Houston, for example, they have a complete communities initiative, which they're getting all sorts of community organizations together to focus on green jobs or jobs of the future which have a lot of times a construction component to it. So get connected to your local mayor's office and/or municipal initiative, and start listening to all of the organizations. When I was on there, there was probably 20 organizations that were just going, "How can companies support us? or "Where do we send our people once we've developed this skill?" or "Help us develop what you need for the future?" That exists. Taking the time to spend time in those places is hugely impactful.

Mike Merrill:

That's a great point. I had never heard of that as well. Are there any other organizations or partnerships that you're affiliated with that the listeners can look into as well that we haven't talked about already?

Leon Harden:

Oh gosh, I should probably know a few more. I'm a part of DICE, which is Diversity and Inclusion in Construction, but that's more for our people initiatives like McCarthy, Gilbane. Burns and McDonnell is a part of it, so some of those large constructors are a part of it. We sort of ideate on how best to expand the tent within our space. I'm not sure if that's the right one, but if there is maybe a smaller version of that. And if it doesn't exist, create it and get two of your competitors together and try to build out this talent pool, because we all know that in this space, this is one of the few spaces in which you can work together because a rising tide lifts all boats. So we want to make sure that this is an effort that is being taken on by a group of people because it's better for the community and impacts the industry overall.

Mike Merrill:

I mean, all of these initiatives that we've talked about in these other associations, they were started by somebody at some point that saw there was a gap or a need. Just dig in and plug into what you've already got started here, right? These ideas that you've already vetted out and are already working on.

Leon Harden:

We have an entrepreneurial spirit about us. I recruited for Burns and McDonnell for a couple years before taking on this role. That's who we recruit for is entrepreneur mindset. If it doesn't exist, build it. Here are tools in support of a \$5 billion organization. Go out there and make it happen. Get into new markets, build new things. That's always been our mindset and I hope that that's everybody who's listening as well.

Mike Merrill:

And I think another, we had a young gal that was a drone pilot on the podcast and there's people that are in estimating that you don't have to have big muscles or be a strong-bodied individual to run a calculator for an estimating program, so to speak. Lots of opportunities in all facets of construction for people of every different background, and I love that you're pushing this initiative and raising awareness.

Leon Harden:

And people of color right now, we're all fighting for the same talent. Go make your money, right? It's this point in time in which people are seeking people of color and people who aren't traditionally thought of as constructors. Now is the time to build up that skillset and really go out there and work for these companies and build a career out of it.

Mike Merrill:

We talk to companies all the time in our organization, that they're paying union electrical contractors, and they're paying \$60, \$70, \$80 an hour to some of these people that are outrunning wire, bending conduit. It's a pretty darn good living to go and let somebody else worry about the headache of running the business in the day to day and to pay those kinds of wages. So lots of opportunity out there, no matter what your background looks like.

Leon Harden:

Absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

This has been a fun and very insightful conversation. I guess, one thing I'd like to just kind of wrap up on, what is the main thing that you would impart as a thought for those that are listening today?

Leon Harden:

I say it all the time and I said it a little earlier, which is, don't be afraid to fail. I can't tell you how many times I screw up in a day, and I still have a job apparently. So definitely take the time to be courageous in the stuff that you want to go for. If it doesn't work the first time, that's completely fine. We just did a Out in STEM which is an LGBT organization focused on in the STEM-related field. We did their conference for the first time. We had maybe seven people come to our booth and maybe one come to the after hours thing. But that's okay, right? Because we know what we need to do differently next year. And this is a slow, methodical, trudging, hard thing to do, so just keep at it. Don't be afraid to fail. Don't be afraid to try different stuff. And if all of those fails, reach out to me and we can strategize.

Mike Merrill:

I think the key to everything that you're sharing here today is that you are, even though the lift might be heavy right now, you believe in the cause. You know that there's value here and it sounds like your organization has found an ROI, even a financial benefit to doing this. Even if it's hard, there is benefit both in feeling better about what you're doing and making a difference, but also there's a financial benefit to these types of initiatives also if you're approaching it properly.

Leon Harden:

If you're not approaching this from altruism, which is one way to approach it, approach it from revenue. Because this is directly tied to the workforce of the future. By 2044, the US will not be majority white anymore. The why is not a thing anymore. It's the how now. You got to move into the how and figure out how you're going to be supportive and build out the mechanisms that you need to facilitate people to join your organization. Because people coming up now, people who are in the industry now, we're all

sort of recognizing that this is what we need to be able to work. And with a shortage coming, better to be prepared.

Mike Merrill:

Great advice. It's getting harder, not easier right now, right?

Leon Harden:

Absolutely. I think the pandemic, a lot of people sort of evaluated what their purpose is and have shifted. Plus you have one of the largest groups of people who have been working for the last 40 years exiting the industry. So all of this culminates into a talent shortage and being able to expand that tent will position your firm to be one that is a long-lasting legacy and will see those that don't shift start to wind away because those that do will certainly find success by making sure that they're capturing the best talent available.

Mike Merrill:

Great advice. That's a great note to end that part of the discussion on. So just a couple personal things real quick at the end here. What's something that you are grateful for Leon in your professional life?

Leon Harden:

I know I talk a lot about failing, I should probably come up with something else. I've got really great people who around me who support what I'm doing. In this space especially, this is the first job that I've ever had where everybody gets a say in how I do it. So I'm very thankful for the people and the mentors and the folks who are cheering me on to make sure that this is a best in class program. That would be probably what I'd give thanks for before turkey dinner this year.

Mike Merrill:

I love that. That's fantastic. What is Leon's superpower? Last question.

Leon Harden:

I think for a long time, I definitely tried to fit in. That was how I worked. I didn't talk about my personal life. I didn't do any of that stuff. What I found is that only-ness is probably my superpower. I'm used to being the only black guy in certain rooms. I'm used to being the only queer guy in some rooms. And so, for me, I've learned to sort of challenge myself, challenge others on any preconceived notions, and using that to my advantage to really disarm people and be able to push forward on some of the things that I really want to accomplish. So taking what I thought could be a detriment based on societal things and sort of flipping that has been the greatest attribute to my career thus far.

Mike Merrill:

Good for you. That's wonderful to hear. Keep up the great work, man. Love what you're doing. I believe in it and we're thankful to be affiliated and have this opportunity to have this conversation with you.

Leon Harden:

Thanks, Mike. I really appreciate the time. I'm hopeful that somebody got something other than failing, but I think this is awesome and that you're putting this together. And being intentional about having more people of color on this show, I think is great work.

Mike Merrill:

Thank you. We appreciate it and we'll catch up with you again down the road. Thanks again.