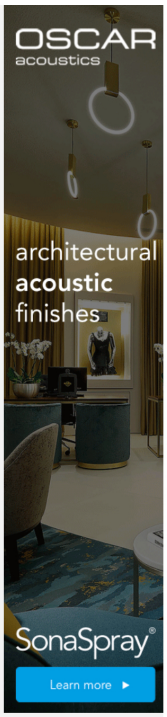

Opinion

Black Lives Matter: Six ways construction can combat racism

Dean Jones
30.06.20

After the shocking death of George Floyd in the USA and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests around the world, Dean Jones shares his own experience of racism and examines how UK construction can tackle it.

The death of George Floyd left me tearful. Since the video depicting a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 Seconds went viral, it has been near impossible for anyone to escape.

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George Floyd was heard crying out 'I can't breathe' before he died. I found the video particularly gruesome to watch and it brought about deep feelings of indescribable sorrow, outrage, disgust and worry because this man could have been me. George Floyd's life mattered. All our lives matter. Black lives matter.

Rodney King was also a victim of police brutality much like George Floyd. Both instances demonstrate the extra use of force for non-violent crimes against unarmed black men. The difference here is, Floyd died and Black Lives Matter protests appear to have a high proportion of supporters who are non-black.

Systemic racism

Systemic racism isn't getting worse. It's just getting filmed. That's thanks, in part, to the widespread use of camera phones. In the case of Floyd, he has people around the world calling for change. It was as if that video was the evidence some people needed to really understand that there is an issue.

Many construction firms and other large corporations immediately released carefully crafted messages affirming that they are committed to diversity and inclusion and stand in solidarity with their black employees on social media, and for good reason.

The same is true in the UK which is also slowly waking up to the fact that racism exists. The UK has just as much of a race problem as the one so blatantly associated with the United States' past and present. However, construction firms and other organisations that profess to support racial justice without a single black board member aren't presently helping the cause.

Personal experience

I was born and raised in the UK and have first-hand experience of the glass ceilings placed above black workers in the workplace. I could write books about it. My

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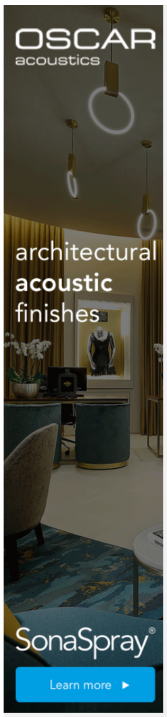

schooling and career have been blighted by both overt and subtle racism at all levels. But I have felt somewhat constrained in the past because I didn't want to be stereotyped and labelled the angry black person.

One of my first episodes of being made to feel different in a negative way took place when I was a child and is something I still regularly experience as an adult. It's the question: "Where are you from?" When I state that I'm British born and I grew up in Angel, a locality on the northern fringes of central London within the London Borough of Islington, that question is usually followed up with: "No, where are you really from?" I've been asked this so many times that I now sometimes ponder on the question, am I really British?

I also remember as a seven-year-old boy in school being asked by my friend who was white if I wished I were white. He recognised something that I didn't until that very moment that sank deep into my sub-consciousness. He recognised the fact that I was the last to be picked in any games or recognised by any of the girls in a predominately white school where I was pretty much left to my own devices.

I've also lost count of the times as an adult I've been ignored throughout my career where I inevitably find myself as one of the few, if not the only, black senior managers present. I have had to work extra hard to be included and listened to which has been exhausting.

Subtle workplace racism

There has long been the perceived threat of black masculinity to white people's safety. This regularly manifests itself in the workplace environment. For example, assertiveness is classed as a good thing, but when a black person is assertive (especially at a senior level) it is often perceived as arrogant or even worse as intimidation. It has been my experience that those covert racists who know how to operate under the radar will employ micro aggressive tactics such as spreading negative comments about black colleagues to wreak havoc on their reputation, by feeding the preconceived views about black people in order to create the perfect storm that can eventually result in the exit of a black employee from an organisation.

Six ways construction companies can tackle racism in the workplace

There's a disturbing paradox in the workplace. As organizations now look to reap the benefits of a diverse, multicultural and inclusive workforce, the countervailing force of racism will try to undermine that effort. However, here are some ways employers can take meaningful action to tackle racism in the workplace.

1. **Own up to systemic racism in the workplace.** Don't make a neutral statement just to make a statement. It needs to be meaningful as change begins with admission. Employers may be reticent to bring up racial inequity in the workplace because it requires the other party to acknowledge its very existence which is uncomfortable, but necessary. Some of the greatest places to work are still racist. Do not live in denial as silence is deadly. There is no neutral. CEOs and COOs need to be specific about the problems and deliberate in their actions. Research has shown that the way an organisation responds to diversity-related events that receive widespread media coverage — like George Floyd's death — either help employees feel safe or contribute towards even more feelings of racial discrimination and mistrust of the senior leadership within those organisations. While working for the House of Commons as a senior manager in 2018, a review into workplace bullying was commissioned, which was welcome and enabled all members of staff to feedback anonymously.
2. **Keep talking.** 2020 has proven to be a historical year surrounding the pandemic, and now, the uprising against racial injustice. This is a turning point and it's critical that organisations actions back up their words or else they'll remain empty promises. Initiate productive and respectful discussions, forming employee resource groups. Bear in mind that company workers may be reticent to talk about racial inequality in the workplace because they fear the repercussions. It is therefore vital to create a safe space where they can share their experiences and support each other without fear of retribution. A good start might be to use an external organisation to conduct and lead on group discussions to ensure impartiality.
3. **Hold yourself accountable.** An anti-racist organisation will acknowledge systemic racism within the workplace, as well as the ways wealth inequality in society may

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racism within the workplace, as well as the ways wealth inequality in society may impact their bottom line through their consumer base. Part of an organisation's accountability is having these uncomfortable conversations. Leaders can then take this critical assessment to examine the work experience lifecycle — from hiring to performance recognition to promotions — and actively make existing systems of oppression more equitable by opening up paths of opportunity to workers who previously didn't have access to them.

4. **Embed anti-racism into your values, training and actions.** Building a stronger, healthier and better workplace culture is dependent on having a solid set of core values that are integrated into every policy, decision and process. It's time to denounce any weak policies, behaviours, partnerships and client relationships that contradict these values.
5. **Spread awareness.** Employers can spread awareness by providing resources to educate individuals about the culture of racism and the history of different races and help change conscious or unconscious racially biased stereotypical thinking of black people through investing in regular staff training. This would help workers to see each other as equals.
6. **Think beyond diversity, to inclusivity.** Most organisations already know some of the things they have to do, so just do it. Strategies to dismantle inequity in the workplace already exist, for example, Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian's resignation from the company's board to make way for a black candidate. The hiring process is just one of many ways' employers can combat racial discrimination. Be more targeted and focused. Applicants should also be prepared to have a conversation about diversity, equity and inclusion by the time they get to an interview. Consider asking the question, "Without using the word 'different,' what's your definition of diversity?"

There are plenty of brilliant people now resisting the blatant racism (both black and white) present in society. These are the voices that need to come forward. Those agitators who recognise empathy, love and kindness for others, not hate, those who recognise that skin colour and any other difference of language, religion, background or sex is completely irrelevant by comparison to what we all share – which is our humanity.

Dean Jones FCIOB is director, strategic projects at Cranfield University

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Comments

1. Great points on how construction companies can tackle racism in the workplace. To further buttress your points, as part of ERG [Employees Resource Group],an "Ally Series" can be formed out of this ERG, where members provide perspective of the challenges they have faced and offer insight on self-reflection, and actions to take as unite against racism.
   Also, some of the biases encountered at varying levels may help understand what racism looks like, and how our industry can prepare for it and excused it. We ought to make it an important baseline before we talk about self-reflection and becoming an ally.Then create a need to repair the system at its roots through dialogue and action.
   Let me introduce part of my cultures that see more transparency into collective responsibility; as African, there is a Swahili word known as Ujima, meaning. Collective Work & Responsibility which CIOB and Construction Industry globally can mirror to accept the fact that we are collectively responsible for our failures and setbacks as well as our victories and achievements. Ujima is a progressive mechanism that see beyond color through establishment of working relationship among piers to educate selves and others.
   ***AFOLABI ADESANYA, MCIOB, C.BUILD E. FCABE* June 30, 2020 at 14:55**

2. That was some journey Mr Jones or Director Jones. Most informative and enlightening.

My hope is, it will reach it's immediate target also a wider targets.
One of it's aim is to stimulate those who have tried and experienced the glass ceiling.
Communicate with those ahead of you, revitalizing you hunger and hope!

David De Leon **June 30, 2020 at 16:45**

3. We can combat racism globally in our industry and unify to bring human race to acceptable standards. I have been working overseas now, more than 15 years and very uncleared some of the rhetorical meaning labelled on workers while working as an expatriate in a foreign country. Workers label as "TCN" [Third Country National] albeit from developed country such as U.K, U.S.A, AUSTRALIA, N.Z and host of others. Also something that are unclear or not easily describable title or label on identification badge. We have to understand that we are in an era of sensitivity and languages matter when we try to express our feelings to others. A positive attitude may not solve all problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort. Others may recognize the word "TCN" [Third Country National] as racist or derogatory. It is not he who reviles that insults, but the opinion of others that results to insulting.
In individual line of professions, ethics matter because it commands respects. A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world. In my organization, I have replaced the ambiguous labeling of foreign professionals working outskirt of their country to be called "EXPATRIATES" instead of "THIRD COUNTRY NATIONAL." It can be abusive and affect workers mood and moral towards assigned projects. When we treat others the way we like to be treated, there will be conjugal, peace and tranquility in work place which will foster progress of work that makes big difference. The built environment needs human race who can focus on essentials and not divisive conditions that will create polluted minds to destroy earths-capes. We should all have one really effective weapon, and that is respects and appreciations of each other.
Yes, I do understand that for everything in our chosen professions, there is a right wing and a left wing; for the wing of love there is anger; but lets remember that for the wing of pride there is humility; for the wing of rejection there is acceptance; for the wing of judgment there is grace; for the wing of honor there is shame. We can only fly with two wings and two wings can only stay in the air if there is a balance.
Two beautiful wings which are humility and respects are for perfection. There are generation of people in our industry who idealize perfection of the built environment. Let us be impeccable with words, how we accommodate others and speak with integrity. Let us believe in unlimited qualities in each other and act in all our business dealings with total integrity, the rest will take care of itself.

AFOLABI ADESANYA, MBA, MCIOB, C.BUILD E. FCABE **July 2, 2020 at 06:33**

4. I first met Dean about 5 years ago when he was in what I consider to be one of the darkest places in the life of a black professional in the UK (in fact anywhere) – dying at the top of his game. As someone who had been through it in the R&D world and worse as a black woman, my heart broke for him. But I was more angry than hurt, you see there's about 20 years age difference and he is brighter and in a more seemingly advanced economy than I ever was! But still he was suffering… why? Racism at the highest or lowest levels is convert, overt, innate and systemic.. fact! I was described by one white senior colleague as "black, bright and beautiful". But I was 'black" first and that was very difficult to swallow. Ss fot Georgie Floyd, I haven't been able to watch the video, but I heard the cries, and I'm still crying even as I write this… I cry for all the absent videos, for over 400 years of black oppression, I cry for the 400 years still to come and the inevitable blood shed to follow…As our kids and theirs WILL NOT tolerate this anymore! So watch out world..we're coming!

Jaz Rodney **July 2, 2020 at 11:53**

5. Well put Mr Jones. The 7 year olds experience resonates with me immensely, I too had similar experiences growing up in and around Islington at times.
I myself found the George Floyd murder unbearable to watch and feel in despair most days in relation to what we are seeing.
Awareness and strategies go hand in hand when moving forward me must

continue on this journey
The racial abuse in the work place can be so covert it's actually so passively oppressive, it's tiresome and demoralising on every level
As I said let's continue this fight for change as a collective people

Thanks for a fantastic article

Nadine Ennever **July 2, 2020 at 11:55**

6. For as long as i can remember, business leaders which includes COO, CEOs, MD, Upper Management have shied away from talking directly about race—often because they fear messing up or inviting blowback over their own practices!...

However, people in this country are not only showing solidarity with George Floyd and other African Americans. They also want to change this moment into one of change and justice in the UK too which i support wholeheartedly.

A 'racist' and 'racism' are clearly very emotive words and the unfortunate reaction to them is to deny an undeniable truth.... And in that denial it's very difficult to deal with the reality that holds people back for no other reason than the colour of the skin. In this historical, critical time, to deal with the enormous challenges, I totally agree Dean that our first step must be honesty and then action... CEO's COO are you listening?

I do however also recognise that there are alot of organisations across the board whether it be educational institutions, healthcare, government etc that are more concerned about the status quo than justice and humanity which is a sad reality.

Jody J **July 3, 2020 at 15:10**

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