

Bridging the diversity gap

Infrastructure for a better future

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Please note: the transcript has been edited to make reading as easy as possible.

Introduction: Welcome to Infrastructure for a better future, a series where we have honest conversations about the infrastructure challenges we are facing and how we can build a better Aotearoa. In each episode we talk to experts from here and overseas about what works when it comes to addressing these issues.

Nicola Richardson: Tēnā koutou katoa. He Director Leadership au i Te Waihanga. Ko Nicola Richardson tōku ingoa. Tēnā tatou katoa. Greetings and welcome to the 'Infrastructure for better future' podcast. My name is Nicola Richardson and I'm the Director of Leadership here at Te Waihanga. Today we're talking about diversity in our infrastructure sector. Te Waihanga has been doing some work to baseline the infrastructure workforce. It's not published yet, but I can share some of those numbers. We have approximately 100,000 people in roles across infrastructure, from admin roles, to labourers, to tradees and managers. Overall, our ethnicity diversity does represent the communities we serve.

On gender, 11% of our population of infrastructure workers identify as women - 11%! The New Zealand workforce as a whole is 48% women. So where are all the women in the infrastructure sector? We can break it down further and we can see that the vast majority of women are in clerical and admin roles – the project coordinator level. We're going to have to change this.

Today, we're not going to talk about why diversity is important or why we need to build inclusive teams. Because the case is there. We have labour gaps, skill shortages and we already have the data that shows that diverse teams are better at problem-solving, they're more innovative. We know that teams that reflect our communities can listen better, understand better and better engage with our communities, and together can build better more resilient infrastructure. So, if we know the why, we have to look at the how. How are we going to make those changes. Today I'm privileged to be speaking to Stacey Mendonça, who has been working tirelessly for the last 27 years on

just this challenge. She has been written about as a leading voice for women in construction and was named the 2023 Diversity Champion at the recent Diversity Works Awards. I could spend about 10 minutes introducing Stacey Mendonça, but I'm going to keep it short, because you can just Google her and find out lots of fascinating information. I can say that she started the National Association of Women in Construction 26 years ago, after noticing herself that the females working in the sector felt isolated and unsupported. She is a Senior Quantity Surveyor and recently got a very cool award – this year, she was appointed a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for contribution to women at the King's Birthday Honours. So, Stacey Mendonça has lots of knowledge – we're going to distill some of this information. We're going to try to do this in a bit of a creative way. We're going to try to go five points of how we can make things different through our industry and through the employers. Five things that our employees – us – can do to lift our diversity. And if we've got time, maybe a couple of bonus points for the public sector. What do we as the public sector need to do differently to ensure that we lift our representation of women and the communities we serve within the infrastructure sector. So, now I'm going to hand it over to Stacey Mendonça. Maybe we start with a little bit about yourself?

Stacey Mendonça: Kia ora. Thank you, Nicola. It's really lovely to be here to talk to you. I have been a QS (Quantity Surveyor) for 30 odd years. I have lived in this diverse world. I am half Chinese, so I've lived in a diverse family my whole life. I've really lived with diversity before it was a frequently used word and before we really understood it, but I know what it's like to not feel that you belong to either one group or the other. Possibly that's given me a drive to make sure that there are women who do find that they belong somewhere. That's what we do at NAWIC, the National Association of Women in Construction. We want all our women to feel that they belong in construction, because sometimes they get told that they don't. That is really the driver and that's what we want to encompass. Apart from the usual things of encouraging women to stay – we want to retain these amazing skills for the women that we have. We want to encourage them to stand up into leadership roles. We want to connect them with other people, as we don't always have an 'old boys' network to rely on. We want to make sure that they are helping others. That means helping other women and

other men and anyone who really wants to get into construction. So, I spend a lot of time encouraging men and women into construction and growing, and that's what I really want to see. It's something that I do after my day job.

Nicola Richardson: Fabulous. You have a vast range of experiences and you've been hearing stories of women throughout the sector. What have you seen work from the employer perspective that genuinely lifts the representation of women and our diverse populations in construction?

Stacey Mendonça: Well, I've seen it work when it comes from the top – where the boss is fully supportive of diversity, it's not a tick box, they truly believe in it. What that means is that they are providing women and men an opportunity to get leadership skills. It's reaching out and helping up. It's not just saying, well we employ them, and everything stops there. It's seeing what else they can do. To me that is listening to their staff. We all know that in a meeting, there are some staff who talk a lot and then there are some staff who sit back and can't get a word in edgewise. I would really like to hear the managers of that meeting, ensuring that they're asking that quieter person for their opinion. Because really, we want diversity of thought. We all know that it's good, but sometimes we have to ask for it. It's about making sure that those quieter people are heard.

I also would really like employers to think about flexible working and part-time work. Also, celebrate those successful staff. We have an awards programme in NAWIC, for excellence in construction. You would not believe how great all the nominees feel by just being asked to be a nominee from their bosses. They love it. What we do is we talk to every nominee and a referee. Some of them say 'Oh thanks, because that is the first time someone has bothered to acknowledge what I do'. They also say, 'Did my boss really put me forward? How great is that?' One of the things that I really love is there is a large national roading company and the boss says to each of the regional directors, send me your nominees from your area and send them to me and we will work out who we will select to put forward to the awards. So, what I really love is the boss of the company has a whole CV of staff that he may never get around to seeing. He's reading them and deciding who goes forward. It's opening up the boss's eyes to people on the ground. That's why I talk about listening. Listen to your staff communicate, don't talk at them and hear what the quiet ones are saying.

Nicola Richardson: I've already got the five tips there. What I've got here is that it has to start from the top. Right. We've talked about great listening, listening to understand it. Number three, we've talked about there about ensuring that all the voices are heard around the table. That it's not enough just to hire diversity, we need to hear the voices. That flexible working continues to be important and that we need to celebrate success. When we look at the recruitment and bringing women and diversity into construction, can you reflect on any key success stories or case studies? I'm not sure you can name the place, but an organisation that has done something different? That inspired people to join them? Or supported recruitment?

Stacey Mendonça: Yep. I can just think of something that happened within a couple of months. It was one of our NAWIC members who actually shifted job companies, because of the strength and support that this sponsor had demonstrated at our awards.

Nicola Richardson: Excellent. So it is that 'being visible'? Showing that you are promoter and that you are an inclusive workplace drives recruitment and people who want to join you.

Stacey Mendonça: Absolutely. That sponsor boss was there. He had bought several tables of staff – men and woman. He has demonstrated his enthusiasm to have women – he has women in the senior leadership team, at board level. This person said, well I want to work for a company where women are valued. The flip side works as well, you know, if you are looking at a new role in a company, you do your research and you have a look at the board. If it's not diverse, for me, it's like thank you, I'm not interested. I'll look elsewhere.

The other thing that I would recommend for people is to be an active bystander. TradesCareers have some great guidelines out. One is 'Keep it decent on site' which is really great. The latest one is being an active bystander. That means calling out bad comments when they are there. It's another one for the boss as well, coming from the top, just not allowing bad language or bad behavior, or just not tolerating uncomfortable situations. It's really powerful if your peers come out and say, 'Hey, that's not a cool thing to say'. Bosses, obviously can't be everywhere and there is a great strength if your work mate is saying, 'That's not cool. Do you realise that sounds a bit off? Do you realise

that it makes that person uncomfortable or feel bad?' Usually, they say, 'Oh, I had no idea.'

Nicola Richardson: Have you seen a difference over the years?

Stacey Mendonça: Well, I have seen less stuff happen. There is still stuff that goes on, but it's reducing. I mean, over 30 odd years, I've seen a huge amount of change. When I first started, we didn't wear high visibility vests and now I wouldn't walk on site without one. When I first started, health and safety was only a new concept and now we do toolbox talks. What is really great is the words 'well-being' and 'mental health'. Unfortunately, construction and infrastructure have a really terrible rate in poor mental health, a lot of burnout, a lot of demands. I think in the past it was kind of, 'Take a concrete pill and harden up'. Now, with organisations like Mates in Construction, and the messages that they're sending out. Hopefully, people are reaching out for help more. So, I am seeing that things like EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) services, it's quite acceptable to go and have an appointment and do that sort of thing. So, there are changes there.

Nicola Richardson: So what else as an individual can we be doing or should employees be doing to lift the diversity of our construction sector or our wider infrastructure sector?

Stacey Mendonça: Well, I really think about looking at who else can add to the team. Instead of working with a whole lot of people who look like you, making sure that the team covers all the bases. If you're in a position to be able to influence that, then that's really powerful. Also as an employee, kind of putting your hand up, we're not really used to doing it and kind of saying, 'Well, look, I think I might have a solution'. I was speaking to somebody the other day, and she said, 'Look, I don't really get much of a chance to get a word in edgeways at the meeting. I give my good ideas to my male colleague and he presents them and they go forward'. I said, 'Stop doing that, they are your ideas and you present them and take the credit'. She said, 'Oh, I don't know, I'm not sure about that'.

I suggested she find an ally in that meeting room or the workplace and sound out the idea with your ally and see if they think it's a good one, then present it at that meeting and own it. That's a really good thing to do. I would also say to employees, include your colleagues and

think about the other people. We are all busy. Sometimes we're working with our blinkers on and we are focused, we've got some pretty tough deadlines, tough pressures, but sometimes taking the blinkers off and kind of having a look around and to evaluate and just recognise some kind of social norms. That chatty person who all of a sudden has stopped talking and is coming in late and just not looking themselves. We hear it from Mates in Construction, just 'How are you going? What's up?' Because as much as we'd like to say that you leave your home life at home, when the chips are down, it doesn't let go. You can't leave it if you're worrying about something. So, keep it on your radar that not everybody's lives are going swimmingly all the time.

Nicola Richardson: Okay, so my key takeaways here, take a risk, be an active bystander, check who else could join in being part of the team? Find allies, include your colleagues and actually be compassionate.

Stacey Mendonça: Yeah, or just aware. Not everybody even wants compassion. They just want to know that you're interested and that they belong. I hear this a lot. People want to feel that they belong. We are a people-based industry. We can't do it without people. We know that we need more, so to not have people feel that they can come into these industries, because of some old stereotype behaviour is really suffocating our own progression.

Nicola Richardson: We've looked at what employers can do and what employees can do. What is it that at a government level, that our policy settings, or the public service could be doing to support more women and those from ethnic backgrounds into the construction and infrastructure sector?

Stacey Mendonça: That's a really huge topic in itself and there's a whole lot of experts on this. I see it really starting again from the top and that means the contract. What all those government organisations who quite possibly issue the most contracts out of anyone. It's making sure that the 3910 contract is fair for all. What I mean by that is not having 160 pages of special amendments changing the contract and assigning too much risk onto one party. Because what that does is by sharing the risk and implementing some new concepts or attributes, then I think the whole outcome will be different. We have relied generally on the lowest price succession in a contract. Maybe that's not the best. I have seen situations where the lowest price at tender has

actually resulted in a huge exit price at the end of the project. So, while it might seem good at the front end of the project, it's had some dire consequences at the end of the project.

Nicola Richardson: How does that impact the diversity and inclusion of the contractors on the workforce?

Stacey Mendonça: If the contractor feels that they're really squeezed for money then that has a flow-on effect on a huge amount of things. So, hiring of staff and getting the right resources.

Nicola Richardson: Are they less likely to try flexible work practices, for instance? Less likely to take a risk on someone?

Stacey Mendonça: Absolutely. What they do is pare back. It's kind of like going into default mode, you do what you know, instead of doing what you should, or what is best. We all do it. If we are under pressure, if we are squeezed our reaction is to do what we know. By not having some of those financial, time or contract restrictions, it does allow for flexibility, trying new stuff that they may not have considered previously. It's quite a long-winded way of saying, again, it starts at the top. That lead contract, has a huge impact on hundreds and hundreds of people down the line.

Nicola Richardson: Well, Stacey we have to wrap this up, and that we could keep going for much longer. A final reflection from myself. I know what you've said in the past is about the reminder that you can't be what you can't see. That reminder that we're doing it not just for ourselves when we step into new roles and the areas of discomfort, but we're doing for those people that come behind us. Thank you for all of your wisdom and stories today. I look forward to having a conversation at another time.

Stacey Mendonça: Absolutely. Thank you.

Narrator: Thanks for listening. Find out more about the work Te Waihanga is doing to transform Aotearoa at tewaihanga.govt.nz