

# BRINGING B[L]ACK CAPACITY TO THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

*A White Paper Studying the Trends, Statistics and  
Solutions to Bring African Americans Back to Industry.*

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## HOW WE GOT HERE

Once, African Americans played a prominent role in Houston's construction industry. Every day, they took great pride in the work they performed as laborers, managers, and business owners. They made livelihoods for themselves and their families while building and reshaping their communities to meet the demands of a growing metropolitan area. One day it all began to change when several prominent African American construction business owners reached retirement age, other industry opportunities opened for the younger generation, construction education and physical education were removed from the school curriculum, and cheap labor moved into the market area.

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These factors contributed to a perfect storm where construction knowledge and skills were not passed on, or easily available to the younger generation. Because of that, the family-owned African American construction company disappeared, skilled workers were priced out of the market, and interest in the trades as a viable career tract dissipated. Sadly, seeing an African American on a construction site today as a skilled laborer, in a managerial position, or as a business owner may be seen as an anomaly.

## WHERE WE'RE HEADING

One day, an entrepreneur saw that there was a need to create viable opportunities for young African Americans and other people of color in the construction industry. Every day, he studied construction management, met with prominent industry players, and discovered many were also interested in this plight.

Using his knowledge, industry relationships, and data collected from various projects, he was able to identify, hire and train adventurous young people on his staff to interview workers, review payrolls and create performance reports. The staff was able to gain experience and use

the data collected to develop and implement workforce development programs to engage, educate and employ young adults for other companies.

Darryl Samuels, Managing Partner of D. Samuels & Associates, is bringing black back into Houston's construction industry.

This initiative started when he was on-site reviewing the progress his compliance team was making in Fifth Ward, an African American enclave in northeast Houston, when a young African American man about 21 years of age approached him and asked the following question, "They are building in my neighborhood; I've worked construction before and can you get me on this project?"

African Americans represent over 22%\* of the Houston metropolitan area but make up less than 7% of the construction workforce. Yet, new developments are popping up in African American communities such as Fifth Ward, Third Ward, South Union, Sunnyside, and South Park with a limited African American workforce presence.

Many high-profile construction projects (schools, highways, commercial buildings) are being built in neighborhoods with high unemployment rates. These new builds are built by developers, owners, and contractors dependent on an outside workforce without extending opportunities for residents in the community to share in the project's proceeds.

It was easy to get that young man on the job; however, the concern became a contractor's willingness to provide

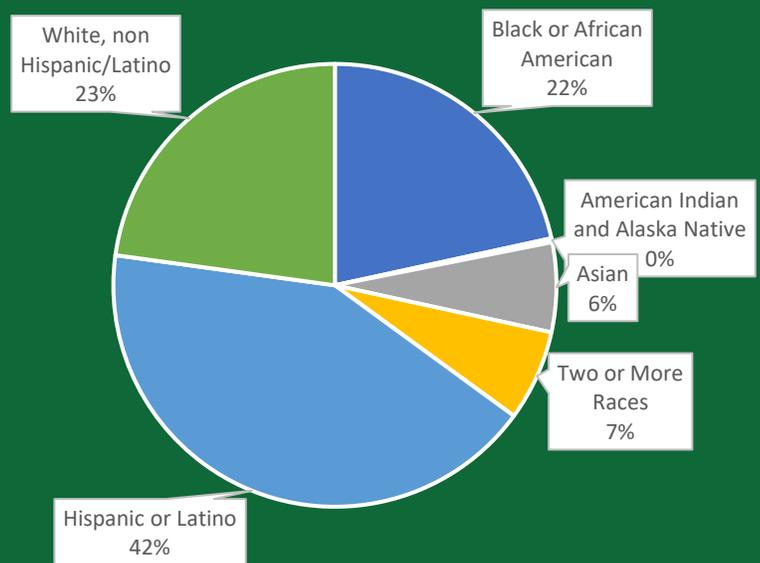


a conducive work environment for the young man to stay, as well as a path to move up and grow within the company. Here are some challenges related to diversity in the construction industry:

- Local construction training providers experience problems in recruiting and retaining African Americans, Asians, and women in the trades because there are no formal networks set up to train, place and retain them in the industry.
- Construction career tracts, entrepreneurship and understanding the culture within the construction industry, their own companies, and on the jobsite is not discussed with entry-level workers.
- Contractors are many times private, family-owned homogeneous businesses with tendencies to not hire people who do not look like, have the same characteristics of, or are related to the owner.
- Some project owners and contractors may want all the money for themselves and rely too heavily on unskilled, undocumented, cheap labor.
- Most owners do not prioritize classroom training and rely upon employees/laborers prior work experience and use on-the-job training to get workers up to speed.
- Small construction companies are not likely to provide formal skills training to their workers for fear the worker/employee will leave the company shortly after being trained.
- Some employers want to be the “smartest” person in the company and are afraid to provide training in fear that the employee may know more than they do.
- Construction Training & Education (CTE) programs train students to be workers, not managers or business owners. K-12 and college curriculum provide occupational skill training but does not incorporate project management or business development training into its CTE programs.

## Houston, Texas Population Race and Origin Make Up

\*Population estimate gathered from US Census Bureau  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/houstoncitytexas,US#>



- Schools and social service agencies provide basic National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) skills orientation training but lack business relationships or a solid employment pipeline to place students/participants in stable employment situations.
- Government sponsored employment programs and staffing companies are great for temporary and/or transitory workers, but not for those seeking long-term careers.
- Many companies and training programs easily lose track of their workers/participants once they leave the company/program.

Grit and thick skin are prerequisites needed to work in this industry. A prominent construction contractor once stated that hiring a Black person for a construction job was a workers compensation case waiting to happen.

This boldness of the contractor’s comment forced the author to research the biases associated with such statements and uncovered the following findings.

- Individual discriminatory conduct and deliberately discriminatory actions by consciously prejudiced individuals are hidden and appear unintentional in the workplace. For example, hiring practices,

where stereotyped beliefs about African Americans contribute to their hiring the demographic for low-level and low paying jobs exclusively, ignoring the individual's potential experience or qualifications for higher level jobs.

- Discrimination is often reinforced by the well-established cultural rules, policies, and practices of an organization.
- Fitting in, or the perceived ability to fit in, is a major consideration when hiring. Fitting in can also mean upholding someone else's agenda. Sometimes we are hired due to perceptions of being less of a threat for advancement (i.e., less likely to take someone's job), and less expensive due to the lack of executive opportunities, and competitive executive pay.

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Many times young ill-prepared African Americans leave construction companies because they are overwhelmed by the company's culture and not mentored on how to work within the different biases and cultures existing within the firm. While on the other hand, company employees are not mentored on how to work with people of other hues or persuasions.

Perceptions of self and the world is influenced by our environment. Despite the diligence of parents providing emotionally healthy homes, children of color are not immune from the negative effects of biases, prejudice, and racism. These negative experiences are cumulative, and each encounter with it eventually erodes positive self-esteem.

In mass, most people in construction are good and honest; however, the horror stories of contractors who cheat their clients and workers is pervasive. Rarely do you hear the

good stories of contractors who do the right things for their employees, workers, and the communities they build in. Negative perceptions risk deepening an industry-wide image problem that is aggravating recruitment, undermining skills and training resulting in fewer young people considering construction as a career choice.

### **DEVELOPING A REAL PLAN FOR CHANGE**

D. Samuels & Associates is the agent of change who guides all stakeholders through the process of choosing a construction career, defining goals, and supporting plans for achievement by offering programming which provides:

1. Information about the operation of and careers within the construction industry,
2. Employing participants,
3. Recommending participants to specific training programs,
4. Assisting participants in learning specific job skills,
5. Acting as a mediator when difficulties arise in a work setting by:
  - a. Creating effective management of mental wellness programs and bias awareness
  - b. Making available community and legal resources
  - c. Offering community support groups run by initiative-taking successful African Americans construction professionals to serve as role models.

To learn more about the author's findings, plans of action, and resources available, visit [www.dsamllc.com](http://www.dsamllc.com).

### **About the Author:**



Darryl Samuels builds lives, careers and projects...one person at a time with talent, technology, and tenacity for a living. Samuels' industry expertise, experience and personable style creates order out of chaos and simplifies the construction process for project owners, general contractors, specialty subcontractors and craft professionals to work collectively and complete high-profile projects safely, on-time, within budget and in compliance.

As the Managing Partner of D. Samuels & Associates (DSA), a Houston area Construction Management firm, he and his 6 employees provide construction, construction management, and resource development services to public and private commercial and infrastructure projects. DSA holds significant contracts with the Houston Independent School District, Ferrovia, and Hensel Phelps Construction Company to perform construction related services on K-12, Highway, Airport and Hospital projects in and around the State of Texas.