



Diversity

NEW FACE: Misty Brown of Clark Builders has found a career that offers her a better future and a chance to do something she enjoys

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The new realities of the workplace present a unique set of management challenges, but the potential benefits are huge

BY SHANNON SUTHERLAND

in the Workplace

Misty Brown blushes furiously as Gary Reber says, “Sure, I like working with Misty. She’s pretty cute.” After the two spend another couple of moments engaged in the kind of politically incorrect banter that’s as common on a construction crew as black coffee and blue skies, he says, “No, I really just like working with my hands and working with people – good people.”

Both Brown and Reber are considered “good people” by their employer, Clark Builders; neither are what one would consider typical employees in the construction industry. Brown, who will begin her apprenticeship as a carpenter this fall, is a 29-year-old mother of a 14, 10 and three-year-old. The former prep cook works alongside Reber, who is a former inmate of the Bowden Institution, a federal penitentiary. Reber began training as a carpenter in prison through a Corrections Canada-sponsored program, and he is now an apprentice. He also holds a university degree in recreational therapy, but says that career is no longer an option.

The construction industry is ripe with opportunities for virtually anyone, and this

need for talent has created a seller’s market for those peddling their professional talents in the trades. For many construction firm owners and managers, trolling in the traditional talent pools for employees is no longer sufficient. As Gerald Clark, manager of human resources at Clark Builders says, “I think everyone in the industry is throwing out a broader net.”

Diversity in the workplace, however, does offer up new management challenges. Employers find themselves tackling issues undreamt of in a workplace of 30 years ago. Sexual harassment policies, cultural sensitivity training and zero tolerance for bullying are all becoming commonplace in the industry. Young, white men swinging hammers and swapping tales about work, women and the weekend is a thing of the past. Groups like the Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project (AAAP), Women Building Futures (WBF), and both the federal and provincial governments are making sure of that. The goal of AAAP, for example, is to register a minimum of 255 aboriginal apprentices by 2006-07. Women Building Futures will be training upwards of 400 women each year by

MAKING IT WORK: Hubert Buckle says his first priority is to work for an employer that treats employees with respect



2007, and according to the federal government's Foreign Worker Program, as many as 20,000 temporary foreign workers will be employed in Alberta next year, up from about 12,000 in 2006.

The first step in avoiding potential management problems is to make sure that the people you're recruiting are suited for the

EMPLOYERS WHO RESPECT THEIR EMPLOYEES SET THE STANDARD FOR AN ORGANIZATION AND CREATE A HEALTHY WORKING ENVIRONMENT.

industry. Women Building Futures offers a course in workplace culture preparation to help prepare women for the sometimes intimidating, often unnerving world of men at work. "The number one thing employers can do to help women on the job is to create a culture of respect," says Judy-Lynn Archer, executive director of Edmonton-based Women Building Futures.

"I think both employers and female employees also need to know there are organizations such as ours out there, so if they have questions, if they need support, they can call us, and we'd be happy to help," says Archer. "I have encountered very few situations that couldn't be resolved."

Prevention of course, is always preferable over conflict resolution and it's best to prepare everyone for diversity in advance. "There are some basics that need to be understood by both employees and employers," says Archer. "For instance, flirting on the job - it never ends well. And sometimes the best of intentions lead to the worst situations."

If done right, mentoring is an ideal way to introduce new employees to the workplace. But one of the most common things an employer will do, which often backfires, is pair a new female hire with a veteran female employee. This rarely works to the benefit of both women. You should match skills rather than gender. "The last thing a woman on the job who has proven herself wants is to be hooked up with some woman who hasn't yet. I often tell women, if you get out there and see other women on the job, don't be surprised if they completely ignore you - at least until they figure out what you're all about," says Archer.

The Construction Owners Association

of Alberta's Respect in the Workplace committee has developed a policy for the industry to deal with the issues of harassment, bullying and violence. The policy not only outlines company expectations, but also deals with site assessments, investigations, disciplinary procedures and much more. The committee recently took its policy and the related resource tool kit on the road to

Edmonton, Calgary and Fort McMurray. About 150 superintendents, supervisors and other HR professionals from across the province attended the seminars.

"The beauty of the policy is that organizations can make it their own," says Marla McCready, a committee member and the training co-ordinator with Merit Contractors. "So many organizations don't have the time or the resources to develop new policies and see them through, so this makes it

much easier. It really protects everyone. It answers some basic questions: What is harassment? What is bullying? What can I do if I'm a victim of this behavior? It also outlines the steps for dealing with it."

The industry and many of the people who work in it have a "show me" attitude. When Gerald Clark told employees he was going to hire apprentices fresh out of prison, there were some cynics. That skepticism was short-lived, says Clark, because if there's one thing that almost everyone in the industry can appreciate, it's a job well done. "At first I think some of our guys were a little apprehensive, but when they saw what these guys were about, it was fine."

Clark now believes some of the workers he has hired through Corrections Canada are his best. "They're clean. They sleep well and they work hard," he adds. But Clark had to adapt the jobs to the specific challenges of hiring inmates. "Since they often don't have a drivers' license, they need to work at our downtown site," he uses as an example. Open communication and flexibility were keys to the successful integra-



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Diversity in the Workplace

tion of apprentices like Gary Reber into Clark Builders' workplaces.

A respected employee is a happy employee.

Hubert Buckle has seen both sides. He was a construction engineer in Jamaica 10 years ago, before he decided to do a little overseas sightseeing. While his adventurous spirit landed him in Canada, he says Jamaica will always be home, and he is still unsure of what the future holds. When asked if he plans to stay in Canada, he says with a laugh, "It depends on how well you Canadians treat us." Although he laughs, it is obvious Buckle is serious when he says this.

Buckle is happy with his current employer, Red Deer-based Scott Builders Inc., but that wasn't always the case with previous employers. "I will say I have been treated as less of a person on the job in the

When co-workers do not accept each other, however, management cannot ignore the problem. It would be naïve to say that everyone is going to get along with everyone else all of the time – especially as the workplace diversifies, says Bob Genee, district manager with Coram Construction in Calgary. "I know there is a good ol' boys' mentality in this industry and a lot of employers are hesitant to hire women. I'm not going to say that every employee here has always given women a warm reception," he acknowledges. "Different people react differently. Some guys will be harder on women and some won't. If I have to move people around, I will, because I want the people who work for us to be comfortable, and I want them to get the feedback they need to do their job."

There will be times when moving conflicting personalities around is a necessity,

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past, and I wouldn't be staying anywhere where that happened again," says Buckle. Employers and co-workers that are honest and treat people well, says Buckle, are his first priorities, because an employer who respects employees sets the standard for an organization.

It is a strategy that has worked well for Scott Rutherford, president of Scott Builders. His company has a successful track record of employing women and minorities. Currently, he has a family of three from Cambodia working at Scott Builders, as well as several aboriginal tradesmen.

"We don't actively recruit landed immigrants, but you can bet that if someone with good skills comes to my door looking for work, I'm going to hire them," says Rutherford. "Finding one good person also leads to finding more. When the guy from Cambodia came to me looking for work, I ended up hiring his brother and father too, and that has worked out really well. If they're Aboriginal, they're Aboriginal. If they're women, they're women. It doesn't matter to us. We certainly don't have any minority recruiting policies in place. And to the credit of the guys in the field, they just accept whoever comes to put in an honest day's work."

says Archer of Women Building Futures. Continuing to find ways to make a workplace hospitable, however, will benefit the employer even when it may seem appealing to avoid any potential problems by sticking to traditional hiring practices.

Once an organization builds a reputation as an employer of choice for women, aboriginals or visible minorities, word spreads. The wife of one of Clark's aboriginal employees recently told him about a reserve northeast of Winnipeg with an unemployment rate of 30%. He has since used that information to bring in several workers from that reserve – it's a virtually untapped labour pool.

Employers are jumping through all kinds of hoops to secure a reliable workforce for their organization and that has presented opportunities for women and minorities that would almost certainly be absent otherwise, says Rutherford. "If things were slow, there's no doubt that it would be harder for women to get into the industry," says Rutherford. "Groups like WBF need success stories, and then it snowballs from there. There's a lot of women who are extremely good at what they do in this business, but the industry still has to accept them," says Rutherford.

Different groups of people will bring new issues to the workplace, but often these issues are overblown by the employer, says Archer. "When I ask a lot of employers if they're willing to hire women, the first thing they often say is that they're worried they'll bring 'women's issues' to the job," says Archer. "When I ask them what that means, they always bring up child care. It's interesting to me how that is considered an issue for women when as many men have children."

Those who have traditionally been underemployed make ideal candidates, says Archer. "When you hire a woman who has put everything she has into developing a career, you're going to get a worker who is highly motivated," she adds. "These careers aren't just about making money. It's about securing a future, buying a car, owning a home and providing for their children."

Many temporary foreign workers have made significant financial investments and personal sacrifices to come to Canada and so are highly motivated to work hard and do well. Genee is cautiously optimistic about Coram's current efforts to recruit workers from overseas. "I was just talking with two guys from Germany this morning who have both been here over a year and they have adapted very well," says Genee. "They've picked up the language and seem to be doing very well."

"But as a long-term strategy, we still prefer to hire Canadians if possible – bringing people over is time-consuming and costly."

It also takes time and money to overcome language barriers and to support foreign workers as they become acclimatized to a new country. Employers have to help foreign employees understand the society and culture – everything from coffee breaks to safety regulations could be completely new to an individual from another country.

Often it's the traditions of the workplace itself that have attracted people to the career. Many women like Brown, who may in fact still be blushing, insist they prefer working in a male-dominated environment. While some adaptations may be necessary and the occasional women-only port-a-potties may need to be erected, as long as employees like Brown and Buckle like their job, like their boss and like their crew, they'll stick around.

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