



Better Buildings Workforce Accelerator Technical Assistance
Implementing Respectful Workplace Programs
Summary of Findings
July 13, 2023

Background and Approach

Browning the Green Space is a nonprofit coalition of leaders and organizations that share the passion to advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in clean energy. We seek to facilitate a just energy transition by putting Black and Brown communities first, and enabling systems change at the intersection of social, environmental, and economic justice. We are powering a just energy transition by creating jobs, building wealth, and reducing energy burden in Black and Brown communities. By removing barriers and expanding access, we seek to close the racial wealth gap while combating climate change.

BGS has been contracted to provide technical assistance through NREL to help support respectful workplace program implementation toolkit development for Elevate. Elevate is a Chicago-based nonprofit whose work includes providing workforce and business support to contractors participating in or interested in the clean energy economy. Elevate is working to create a respectful workplace toolkit (training and resources) for project owners and general contractors to implement on their construction projects, with a focus on small contracting businesses.

In an effort to help Elevate develop a toolkit for project owners and general contractors committed to creating safe and respectful workplaces for women and people of color, BGS has developed a Focus Group Guide for Elevate to use to conduct focus groups to further understand best practices around creating a respectful workplace. BGS conducted two pilot focus groups to help refine the Focus Group Guide and gain preliminary insights on designing respectful workplace programs and identifying policies, practices, and procedures that enable women and people of color to protect themselves from and take action against the harassment and discrimination they may face in construction workplaces. Participants of the two focus groups included four executive-level representatives of organizations working in the contracting and clean energy spaces, as well as organization staff members. The BGS-led focus groups included conversations designed to identify and evaluate common respectful workplace practices through guided discussions and review of plausible scenarios representing disrespectful behavior.

In addition to providing the Focus Group Guide to Elevate to facilitate further discussion with small construction contractors on best practices for implementing respectful workplace programs, the following summary of finding, lessons learned, and next steps are provided to support Elevate's efforts to develop a Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) Toolkit for the contractors they work with.

Summary of Findings

Based on our research of existing best practice recommendations and our focus group discussions, the following themes emerged around approaches to developing respectful workspaces:

- **Developing Company Guidelines:**
 - Focus group participants emphasized the importance of establishing processes and practices to ensure employee collaboration in developing company guidelines. Specific suggestions included:
 - Integrating company values into behavior guidelines and drawing a clear delineation of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Every company has a unique set of values and there is not a one-size-fits-all set of guidelines.
 - Being explicit about the local, state, and federal laws with respect to harassment and aggression. Company laws should complement criminal law; neither is robust enough on its own but are both extremely important. Do not just rely on criminal law to set the culture - this would risk employees perceiving the company as passing off their responsibility to a third party. Additionally, putting the onus on employees to seek legal recourse is unrealistic and sends a message that an employer has no interest in supporting their employees.
 - Facilitating organization-wide discussions to identify and define guidelines, as opposed to defining them at the executive level and delivering them without opportunity for input. Vignettes and scenarios can help create dialogue and spark thoughtful feedback with a focus on employees. Intentionally build inclusivity and transparency to ensure everyone is engaged and understands the process.
 - Being intentional and straightforward while keeping in mind that employers will not always feel comfortable being honest.
 - Align diversity and inclusion efforts with the company business model.
 - Articulate the benefits of DEI efforts for individuals and the organization.
 - Ensuring the safety of employees is paramount, and this may influence job requirements and assignments for BIPOC employees. However, transferring or re-assigning BIPOC and women employees may be perceived as punitive toward those who raise an issue or speak out to management, as compared to addressing the root cause and taking corrective action toward the offending

employee, and presents the risk of BIPOC and women employees opting to leave the company.

- **Process for Reporting and Addressing Incidents**
 - Address violations proactively and transparently – prompt response time and transparency from HR and Employee Relations are a necessity.
 - Supplement limited internal HR and Legal Departments with third party resources if necessary.
 - Leverage relationships with local trade unions, which have been proven valuable in shifting policies and facilitating equity discussions around women and people of color.
 - Establish a CEO “Open Door Policy” to demonstrate commitment to company values.
 - Establish and promote clear and confidential reporting systems and conflict resolution methods. This may include designating a point-person for reporting incidents.
 - Establish affinity caucuses that facilitate discussions with management. Ensure the affinity groups have a voice and impact within the organization.
- **Rewards, Punishment, and Tracking Progress**
 - Prioritize safety. This includes frequent reinforcement of the importance of safety and emphasizing organizational values as a foundation for fostering safety.
 - Spotlight company employees that exemplify the desired behavior.
 - Promote positive behavior by rewarding incident-free performance as well as completing work effectively.
 - Advance and emphasize zero tolerance to prevent habitually disrespectful members from promotion or further employment.
 - Establish and use metrics to track and publicize progress (e.g., employee satisfaction surveys, retention tracking, and exit interviews).

Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations for Next Steps

In preparation for the development of the Respectful Workplaces Focus Group Guide, BGS reviewed existing respectful workplace and DEI guidance documents, including its own Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Pledge, and developed a set of guidelines and questions to identify the most effective approaches to developing a respectful workplace program. Additionally, BGS interviewed clean energy construction practitioners with lived experiences in the construction workplace to gain feedback on how respectful workplace approaches apply to real work scenarios.

To refine the focus group guide, BGS conducted two pilot focus groups. The first focus group comprised two executive-level representatives from the same company, and the second focus group comprised two executive-level representatives from two different companies, as well as two management-level representatives. The focus groups were held virtually and were 60 minutes each. An agenda was provided ahead of the meeting to provide the project context,

real-world scenarios for discussion, and a list of curated best practices for cultivating and reinforcing a respectful workplace.

We encountered several challenges over the course of the two pilot focus groups that were conducted:

- Running the focus groups with more than one organization represented and with multiple people from an organization did not allow everyone to be heard and it appeared some people remained quiet and deferred to others in the call instead of speaking up.
- 60 minutes was not sufficient to allow for rich and thorough discussions. This topic is complex by nature and many people have personal lived experience with it that they shared to support the conversation.
- While our focus group participants had experience designing and supporting DEI practices at their respective organizations, none had experience explicitly designing, building, implementing, and evaluating a respectful workplace program at a small construction workspace.

To support Elevate's efforts to develop a respectful workplaces toolkit for project owners and general contractors to implement at small construction worksites, we are sharing the following lessons learned and recommended next steps, in addition to providing the Focus Group Guide to facilitate further discussions on best practices for designing the toolkit.

- **Clearly communicate the design and intention of the focus group discussion in advance.** Our initial set of discussion questions used in the first pilot focus group were built around the curated set of best practices and recommendations, with those practices built into the questions as assumptions. This led to some confusion during the first focus group. The advanced material sent to the second focus group was explicit about the sources of the best practices, example scenarios, and goals of the discussion, which led to a smoother conversation.
- **Allow more time for discussions.** This can be accomplished by meeting with organizations one at a time to strengthen individual voices and avoid groupthink and/or increasing the focus group meeting length from 60 to 90 minutes.
- **Allow sufficient planning time to identify focus group participants.** As Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is an emergent area within the clean energy contracting space, it was challenging to identify leaders and organizations that have experience implementing respectful workplace practices. The outcomes of the focus groups would be improved by taking sufficient time to target and seek out focus group attendees, specifically, clean energy contracting business owners who are actively implementing or have implemented DEI practices into their workplace culture. One suggested approach is to connect with DEI training organizations specifically working with small contractors to help identify the best target audience for these focus group conversations. For example, *RISE Up* (Respect, Inclusion, Safety, and Equity), also known as *RISE Up 4 Equity*, is a Respectful Workplace Campaign in the construction trades designed to provide

all workers with the tools and support necessary to create and maintain a safe, inclusive, and productive environment for everyone. RISE Up provides industry best practice workplace consulting and training to help contractors and sub-contractors create an environment of productivity, safety and equity in construction management and on work sites”. Consider inviting alumni from this or similar programs to future focus groups to understand how the theory was put into practice.

Through this summary of findings and the provided Focus Group Guide to interview additional respectful workplace experts, we hope that Elevate will have an understanding of best practices to implement a Respectful Workplace Program that can be used to design their toolkit. Building and implementing respectful workplace practices can be daunting and nebulous, but we seek to facilitate the process by leveraging the work that has already been done to understand and bring awareness to the challenges and barriers faced by tradespeople of color and women.