

Getting pigeonholed as a minority-owned business: My Biggest Mistake

Marcia Pledger, *The Plain Dealer* By Marcia Pledger, *The Plain Dealer*

Follow on Twitter

on July 20, 2013 at 12:00 PM, updated July 20, 2013 at 1:19 PM

By Ariane Kirkpatrick, as told to Marcia Pledger



Ariane Kirkpatrick, president and founder of AKA Construction Management, said her biggest mistake was allowing her company to be pigeonholed as a minority company because she sought minority and female-related business certifications aimed at helping to level the playing field

.Lynn Ischay, *The Plain Dealer*

The Company: The [AKA Team, a Cleveland-based construction management firm](#) focuses on providing labor and site maintenance for projects that range from carpentry and masonry to demolition and construction clean-up. Founded in 2009 by Ariane Kirkpatrick, the company has 47 employees.

The Mistake: Community benefit agreements and diversity and inclusion initiatives have been great for many businesses, including my construction management company. But there's a downside to being approached about potential contracts based on gender and race.

My biggest mistake was letting my company be defined as an acronym. FBE/MBE/SBE all identify me as a black female who owns a small business. Most construction projects have requirements so that certain groups don't get excluded from construction projects. And the fact is, I was approached by larger companies my first year in business, strictly because I have those acronyms attached to my business.

The problem is that you become known as that designated acronym and your talents and qualifications seem to get overshadowed. Getting certifications definitely helped me to get in the door, starting out with post construction clean-up jobs. Then I got more business based on leveraging things I learned from previous opportunities like serving as chief of housing for 10 years for the city of Warrensville and working as a general contractor in residential rehab and small business construction. It led to diversifying services into areas like demolition and storm water prevention plans.

There's not a lot of women-owned construction businesses in this area, so I expected to hear people call my business a front company. That didn't bother me because I enjoyed having to overcome that obstacle.

What bothered me was that people were approaching me more for being a "female business enterprise" company than for our construction capabilities. I took the certifications off my card about a year after I started the business, but I knew that wasn't enough. I had a lot to learn if I wanted to be looked at as a construction company owner who happened to be black and female.

Like a lot of owners of start-ups, I was just so happy to get a contract. But I knew it meant nothing if I didn't have the tools in place so that I could stay in business.

The Fix: I took a look at the business organizations I was affiliated with, then I started really using their offerings to help build my business with new technologies, marketing and new business relationships.

I am involved in several organizations that provide business growth for minority businesses. A lot of what they offer is based on the certification process and issues that minority businesses tend to face. They helped lead me to both nontraditional and traditional funding, but I needed help that could only come from industry specific organizations.

Ironically I was already a member of one of the construction organizations, but I didn't take advantage of training that was available as part of a mentor project. It wasn't free. I invested in my business, spending about \$20,000 on training. I learned to take advantage of opportunities and demanded accountability from participants who own and work at large construction management firms.

The [Construction Employers Association](#) helped me to broaden my knowledge as it relates to safety, project management, estimating, scheduling and risk management. Instead of thinking like a small "acronym," I gained confidence to deal directly with decision-makers.

The bottom line is my company started growing when I changed the way I ran my business. If you think small you'll be small and that's just not for me. You have to start somewhere, but I used to do way too much by myself. I was going to job sites, project meetings, and doing estimating and project management scheduling. Basically I was into just about everything except lifting a hammer.

Even when I started changing the way I think, it didn't happen overnight. I was involved in a project management organization for future executives, before I realized I should have been developing my team by sending one of them. I was already an executive.

I learned to invest in marketing presentations and even signage at construction sites. As the business continued to grow with larger projects I hired a controller, project manager, human resource person and director of operations. All of that came from classes that taught me about growth, including my mentor protege relationship with [Donley's construction](#). The company allowed me to participate in their internal training.

Set-asides were and are an interesting concept. But without education, accountability and guidance, there's no true measurable guide for success.

What I mean by that is, if you're just getting the contract based on a set aside -- not just your construction knowledge -- it won't matter because you won't stay in business. Sustainability is the key ingredient in ensuring that women and minority owned businesses are truly successful.