

## Diversity in the Rubber Industry



## Driving culture change, embracing 'coopetition'

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WARWICK, N.Y.—Rubber may be in just about every facet of daily life, but minorities in the rubber industry—especially at the executive level—can be a rare commodity.

Enter Cedric Glasper, CEO of Mechanical Rubber Products Co. Inc., who purchased the custom contract manufacturer of rubber and plastics in 1995. He grew up in St. Louis, and has spent his recent years anywhere between New York and central California, the east and west coast locations of Mechanical Rubber.

He has led the company through acquisitions and expansions, and he has done it through competition and collaboration—“coopetition,” as he calls it—as well as diversity of thought.

“I am a strong believer that you need the fringes to make you better,” Glasper said. “You may not be able to pinpoint exactly what that means, but you know it’s different—and it adds value. ‘Coopetition’—collaborating with a competitor. In some cases it’s like a marriage. But to do that, you have to bring in diversity.”

Glasper has operated with this philosophy since his academic days at the University of Missouri at Columbia, California State San Bernardino and California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, where he studied architecture, mechanical engineering and urban planning. And he leans on this philosophy in his professional career, welcoming those with unique and different thought processes as opportunities to learn, to add another tool to the toolbox.

“A lot of people, including Black males, miss out on that lesson,” he said. “It is an opportunity to say I am equal, I can learn, I can compete, I can start something and finish something. Everything is opportunity. Your competitor, your adversary, presents an opportunity to make you better.

“Being Black, I don’t spend a lot of time now focusing on the fact I am Black. I know who I am. I’m

fine with that. What I focus on is my competitor or my adversary, and they are the opportunity.”

Glasper gleaned his drive to succeed in part from his father, who was hired in St. Louis by what was then a relatively unknown package delivery service company called UPS. His father obtained his job through affirmative action.

“Word got out that they were hiring Black people. I saw a lot of the growth of UPS, a lot of the different perspectives that helped expand the company into what it is today,” Glasper said. “You can’t have too many people in the middle ground who think the same. You have to have that quiet ‘coopetition.’”

Glasper is a risk taker because someone with a different background took a risk on him. He was hired out of college by a Jewish family that owned Itran-Tompkins Rubber Corp., a bonded metal and custom-molded rubber company based in New Jersey.

“That is where I got my opportunity,” he said. “They are a minority. I had to learn the culture to understand this. Nothing was handed to them, either.

“As far as Black folks in America, we have a long history of oppression. We feel that boot on our neck—I am reminded of the George Floyd situation—and I had to prove myself to get these opportunities. Fast forward to today, and I had to prove myself to be in this interview. I’ve been vetted.”

Glasper said that people in the margins and on the fringes “are the most creative people on the planet.”

“The poorest folks have to be

creative to eat. The wealthy expect it to be handed to them,” he said. “Those with diverse backgrounds will look under different stones than you look under. Nothing can stop you if you embrace diversity.”

## Sharpening the steel

The rubber industry often is an unknown to the general population, and can be even more inconspicuous to people of color, Glasper said.

“It is interesting in this industry, it is not very diverse,” he said. “Even a majority of the U.S. population doesn’t know about it. I am still explaining what rubber is to people.

“But when you go into a minority population, it’s like you are speaking a foreign language. So when I meet different minorities, I’m not sure they have done the research. There are opportunities to get into this field.”

Glasper said he does not necessarily have a quota or threshold he tries to meet in hiring those with diverse backgrounds, rather he said he focuses on those with diverse thought processes.

“If you are coming from outside my box, my niche, that’s always a plus,” Glasper said. “It is always good to have a different perspective. I don’t necessarily try to hire a Black or Asian or Indian person. If they are meeting certain parameters, I can teach them rubber. I like people who bring a different perspective than the norm.”

Too much agreement within this middle ground creates stagnation, he said.

“I don’t want the new guy who fits dead in the middle in the culture of the company,” he said. “Now I have more people saying the same thing, with fewer people on the edges. I don’t need that, unless I need a robot. Peo-



Glasper



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ple with a little talent in a different direction kills stagnation and creates competition within.

“Everybody uses benchmarking and conducts case studies on competition. Everyone is trying to get the top customer. If everyone is fishing in same fishing hole, there are only so many fish. Stop fishing where everyone else is—and that goes for hiring, sourcing, training and sales.”

Glasper added that mentorship is important in any stage of life, and can be crucial for minorities breaking in to an industry that is too often monochromatic.

“In talking with younger people, I tell them there is a difference between WalMart and Amazon,” he said. “WalMart was the big dog with total control. Then Amazon comes along, almost as a joke, passes him up and blows him away. WalMart made the rules, Amazon broke the rules and remade them.”

Glasper said he has had many mentors himself, even some that he considered an adversary or competitor. He recalled a mentor from his college days, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force.

“If you hear ‘You’re doing great’ all the time, you are not in the right place,” Glasper said. “He told me that it is great that I can start and finish something, but you need to be more than that. They are trying to sharpen the steel.”

The CEO reiterated that the ability to embrace change will prevent lethargy.

“Have a vision, that’s great, but you have to have drive,” he said. “I took the ball and I’m still running with the ball. I keep modifying my vision, and I keep trying to execute my vision or my dream.

“As a young Black person, you have to find that vision and drive it. Period. Your company will not improve or change until you change. That’s the make up of America. That’s diversity.”

Mechanical Rubber manufactures custom rubber and plastics products for the aerospace, military defense, transit and industrial markets.

The company recently set up an office in Richmond, Calif., and a manufacturing plant is expected to be built in the coming months in the same region.