

# Procurement Block S1E9 Michael Robinson

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

supplier diversity, ibm, suppliers, procurement, diverse suppliers, companies, supplier, diverse, understand, michael, standpoint, program, organization, supplier diversity program, grover washington, create, impact, technology, implementing, grow

## SPEAKERS

Michael K. Robinson, April Harrison

### **April Harrison** 00:03

Welcome to Procurement Block, a podcast all about digital transformation in procurement and supply chain and how blockchain, risk management and change management all factor in. I'm your host April Harrison, Marketing Director for Trust Your Supplier. I'm a procurement novice eager to learn more from the people who are at the forefront of procurement innovation.

On today's episode, I am being schooled by Michael Robinson. Michael K. Robinson is the Program Director of Global Supplier Diversity for IBM's integrated supply chain. He is responsible for leading IBM supplier diversity initiatives worldwide. In this role, Michael and his team focused on the utilization, development, and mentoring of diverse suppliers who could provide value add to IBM's supply chain.

Under Michael's leadership, IBM has been recognized for numerous awards, including Corporation of the Year by the NMSDC, three different times, one of the Top Corporations by WEBENC, 13 times, and one of diversitybusiness.com's Top Corporations, just to name a few. IBM has spent in excess of \$2 billion, first tier, annually worldwide with diverse enterprises since 2006. And in excess of \$1 billion, first tier, annually with diverse enterprises in the US since 2000.

Michael's IBM experience has spanned various disciplines within manufacturing, procurement and distribution. Michael's full bio, along with a more extensive awards list can be found in the show notes at [procurementblock.com](https://procurementblock.com).

Michael attended the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia, received his BS from Cheyney University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his MBA from Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Michael brings his wealth of knowledge and experience to our conversation on supplier diversity. He explains how to jazz up your supplier diversity program by understanding the benefits, how to identify and attract diverse suppliers, and what to take into consideration when implementing or expanding a program. Michael, welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to have you here with me today.

**Michael K. Robinson** 02:25

It is my pleasure to be here.

**April Harrison** 02:28

Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself? What kinds of things do you enjoy outside of work?

**Michael K. Robinson** 02:35

Well, I was born in a little small town in the south. So, I really enjoy being outside, biking, hiking, and I love jazz. So any types of jazz. I love jazz. I love to relax when I'm away from work. It is a stress reliever, and it allows you to just think about anything.

**April Harrison** 03:03

Absolutely. It's really good focus music. I use it sometimes when I'm working. Another completely non related to our topic question here. I ask every guest if you had one superpower, what would that be? And you can only just pick one.

**Michael K. Robinson** 03:20

I refuse to pick one. You're asking this specific question, but I get a little flexibility and in asking that because I did listen to some of your prior podcasts. And I thought about this for a second. And I thought about it from the standpoint of if I had to have a superpower, I looked at it from the embodiment of the individual. So, I would say Superman number one because I remember growing up as a kid watching that and it would come on, you know, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in one in a single bound, something of that nature that embodies that those skills or our state's super intellect and unlimited wealth, aka Tony Stark the Iron Man.

**April Harrison** 04:18

Well, you're right, you know most superheroes have more than one capability right? You know, superman did that - he turned back time, like flying around the world.

**Michael K. Robinson** 04:29

I remember that.

**April Harrison** 04:32

But Tony Stark has a really cool suit.

**Michael K. Robinson** 04:35

Yes, and he is very innovative. Being at IBM, a technology company. You think about the innovations and how he moved technology forward. So having those skills I think that would be fantastic. And it depends upon the individual who has the skills though and what they do with it.

**April Harrison** 04:56

I agree. I guess that is where the intellect comes in. Well, that's a really good segue because I am learning the basics around different initiatives and technology within that broader area of procurement

and supply chain. And so I have asked you to come on and school me a bit on the topic of supplier diversity. We have a global audience for a podcast, and to set the foundation for our conversation, I just want to start with a very basic question, which is, what do we mean by supplier diversity? And why is that important?

**Michael K. Robinson** 05:36

If you think about it, simplistically, all supplier diversity is, is including those business owners who've been left out of the economic mainstream because of their race, their gender, disability, etc., providing them the opportunity to participate in the procurement process. Another way of thinking about it is just leveling the playing field. Because what we attempt to do is to ensure that, from a supplier diversity standpoint, as I mentioned, those suppliers who have been left out of economic mainstream, they are given that opportunity to participate. It's not one of giving away business or reducing your requirements, it's having an open door policy, that you're always seeking the best suppliers. And if you think about supplier owners, or business owners, most of the business owners today, the majority of them are diverse business owners, women, minorities. So in order for a company to be the best, you have to level that playing field and seek those best suppliers. So that's all supplier diversity is - ensuring that your procurement processes are not prohibitive to people based upon gender, race, or those items.

**April Harrison** 07:02

There was a lot that happened in 2020. And I wanted to ask, what changes have you observed in the industry or maybe even you've perhaps implemented some changes at IBM as a result of the heightened racial tension during the last couple of years?

**Michael K. Robinson** 07:21

Okay, if you look at it, from an industry standpoint, what the murder of George Floyd did out in the open and everything, it put a focus on the social inequities in America. And what you had was a lot of corporations focus more on the supplier diversity. It could have been a situation where it was companies who had never had a program, looking into creating one, and those who had a program only in name only, so to speak, looking to refocus on it, how could they grow their program more effectively? How could they impact, I'll say number one, the communities in which they serve, and looking to be more impactful. The thing that I tell companies about this, and IBM is one of those companies that is one of the most, I'll say, benchmarked, and I participate in a lot of those. Look at it from the standpoint of, yes, supplier diversity utilizing diverse suppliers can impact society, because you're providing funds into those neighborhoods, into those business owners and women owned suppliers, black owned suppliers, they hire more women, they hire more black employees. So you are impacting those communities. But the key factor on that too is you have to understand the value that supplier diversity brings to a company overall. You have to understand its impact to innovation, its impact to technology, the responsiveness of diverse in black owned suppliers. Once you understand those factors and you know the ROI that the company is getting, it is one that is sustainable, because you know as well as I do from a historic standpoint, social programs come and they go. So yes, the events of last year did put a real focus on it. However, if from a corporate standpoint, they don't understand that value add that I was just mentioning, it won't be sustainable over time. And IBM's program it is you know, it started in 1968, so we understand the value is sustainable. And that's one of those key factors I would say input out to the people who are listening. And from an IBM standpoint, as I mentioned is 53 years old. As

always, we continue to focus on what we're doing. We understand that we do have a great program. But you have to always ask yourself, what can I do better? What do I need to change? And I think that is going on throughout the industry. It's good that the focus has been put on it because of those issues that occurred last year. But now is one of how do we make it sustainable? How do we totally understand that value that it brings, and if you do that, again, it can be sustainable.

**April Harrison** 10:37

I love your point of it's it's mutually beneficial to do this, right? It's not just one sided or a handout.

**Michael K. Robinson** 10:45

Right, and unfortunately a lot of companies in the past have thought that. They have thought that utilizing diverse, minority and women owned suppliers, it costs more, it's not as innovative. But if you look at the technology that's been created, the new innovations, most of those have come from small companies, startups, companies that started in people's garage, and it grew, and that in a lot of major corporations that went out acquire those companies. So it's, as I say, it is innovative, and it's a win win situation for both.

**April Harrison** 11:24

I'm gonna fly off the cuff here and bring back in the jazz for just a second. In the music industry, jazz was very innovative.

**Michael K. Robinson** 11:34

Right and it was looking at something that was new, something that hadn't been done in the industry before you heard it on, on the peripheral. But as more and more people began to understand that and understand how you're bringing the horn, the piano, the drum and the strings together to create something that was a little unique. Each one of those individuals and musicians, to a certain extent was freestyling. But they were doing it in harmony with each other to create something better. And that's what supplier diversity is. You're doing things in harmony to create something better, something that's a win win.

**April Harrison** 12:14

Music is the universal language. I totally get it. Let me ask you, how do you identify and then attract diverse suppliers.

**Michael K. Robinson** 12:24

As I mentioned to you before, our program is 53 years old. So from our standpoint, because it's been in the industry for so long, a lot of diverse suppliers know of us they know our philosophy. If someone, if it's a new company that's getting into it, I would tell them to look at the NGOs. The NGOs, non governmental nonprofit organizations, such as the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, the NMSDC, the National Minority Supplier Development Council, these are nonprofits that certify diverse-owned businesses, they have databases full of those. Also go to trade shows, go to conferences, and that's one thing that my team and I do a lot. Even in today's virtual environment, you're speaking at those conferences that are held virtually, you're going to those conferences and having a virtual booth. So you're getting to meet new suppliers. You want to grow your database that you already have, but

also you want to continually seek and to put your name out there. And we do this from a global aspect. Because our program, IBM is in is in 170 countries, and we have a program in 170 countries. So it's totally global. And the team does this from a worldwide standpoint, they interact with the NGOs. In the Asia Pacific groups such as we connect and certify women owned businesses, we bring in suppliers to meet our buyers so that we can establish those relationships. And also we have a portal, we have a portal where suppliers can come in, and they can register anywhere in the world. So those are some of the methods and of course, I get probably 50 to 100 letters a day from suppliers who are just reaching out. They've heard about us and they're reaching out. And one of the things that we want to ensure that when we say we are we're spending or we're doing business with a diverse owned business, that it is certified. Some of the organizations that I mentioned, they go out and if a diverse owned business wants to certify, it's a simple process that they go through and it ensures that the business is at least 51%. owned, operated and managed by a diverse individual and The reason for that is that historically, when the program started in the 60s and 70s, there were a lot of companies that had pass throughs, they were fronts where you had a woman or a minority, who was sitting in and as the President, but it was owned by a majority own person, or that woman minority was not managing the company. So these organizations go in, they have a process, and they verify and validate that. And by doing that you're ensuring that you are spending with a diverse owned supplier, and that you are impacting those communities in which you serve.

**April Harrison** 15:42

What are some of the things in addition to that, that an organization should consider when implementing a supplier diversity program? Yeah, I mean, IBM has been doing it for 53 years. So I'm sure there's lessons learned there.

**Michael K. Robinson** 15:54

And my first response, and I thought about this, my initial response is, why are you doing it? And let me explain. Just as we've talked about the social issues that occurred last year, a lot of companies are getting into it, and we're having this conversation, and we have to be frank as we look at this: Are you getting into it to make an impact? And are you getting into it and you understand the value that those suppliers can bring to you, that diverse suppliers who can bring to you? Or are you doing it as a facade, because unfortunately, just as everything, there are some companies who, who have created a supplier diversity program, but it is not functioning, and they are not committed to it. And that goes back to the statement I was making on sustainability. Number one, define why are you doing it. Define that culture of your company. Is the company committed to doing it. And then as you're starting out, I would say, make sure that your senior executive team, your CEO, the senior managers within the organization is committed, then also communicate effectively throughout the team, I think it's been stated that one of the biggest misconceptions of communication is that it actually occurred. So you have to continue to communicate and eliminate those unconscious bias, as I had mentioned before, that diverse suppliers cost more to utilize. So communicate, understand why you're doing it, and then create a first-tier program. And when I say first here, that's the direct span that you have with diverse owned suppliers. So created a versatile program, implement it, make sure it's functioning properly, and then create your second-tier program. And the reason that I point out both of those is, from a corporate standpoint, no corporation can work directly with every supplier. So you want to make sure that throughout your supply chain, you're providing opportunities to diverse suppliers. They may not be direct, but they could be

your second-tier, your suppliers are utilizing those diverse suppliers and providing services and products to you. And by doing that, you're going to grow those suppliers downstream in the supply chain so that eventually they may become your direct supplier or your first-tier supplier. So again, why are you doing it, communicate, get your executives commitment, because one of the biggest fallacy is that supplier diversity resides within one department, supplier diversity has to be a corporate wide commitment.

**April Harrison** 18:53

That's a great framework, you know, start with that intention, and then get alignment, and then all the planning to put it to action. Where do you see supplier diversity in 2030?

**Michael K. Robinson** 19:07

I'll respond in two ways. One, from a professional standpoint, I believe as a profession, it is being recognized, again the value that supplier diversity brings to a company. So by doing that, I think you will see the profession grow. I think you will see people at higher levels within the organization who are managing that who have control over the supplier diversity organization and more influence so that is not just an afterthought. It is a profession within procurement. Just as in HR you have various professions within it and there is an HR chain within the organization. And within procurement, I think you're going to see that supplier diversity individual is going to be more respected, it's going to grow over time. And then from a strategic standpoint, I see more corporations understanding that value of it, I think you will see more corporations implementing plans. You will see them, you know, understanding totally that value that it brings in that it will be more effective. And you know, from an innovative standpoint, from a technology standpoint, and also that byproduct of impacting the communities. So I do see it growing over time. And I think what you will have also is more companies will have a global or an international program, and I'll distinguish between those two, because you have a lot of corporations who have a US program, but they don't have a program outside of the US. And likewise, you have some companies who have an international who may be headquartered outside of the US, they have a supplier diversity program in the US, but not in their own country or outside of it. I think they will understand that value more, and you will see supplier diversity being applied in many more countries overall.

**April Harrison** 21:15

There's a lot coming out from the EU, around supplier diversity as well right now. So, lots to do in the next 10 years. Do you have any professional advice or life hacks that you would be willing to share with me and our listeners?

**Michael K. Robinson** 21:34

The piece of advice that I give, and I recall reading this somewhere, and I just scribbled it down, and it came to me as we were talking. The advice is that, and I'm gonna paraphrase, it was that improvements are only temporary until they become a part of who you are. You know, the goal is not to read a book, The goal is to become a reader. The goal is not to run a marathon it's to become a runner. And it's as we were talking about music it's not to learn an instrument, the goal is to become a musician. So, this year and in the year to come, I would say focus on the identity that you want to build and become that.

**April Harrison** 22:22

That is beautiful. It does remind me of a saying I heard that "what you do every day matters more than what you do once in a while". So incorporate it into your identity because it's something that you do every day. I believe you're going to be presenting at Procurement Foundry's Blue Sky event in November. What other projects do you have on the horizon or other engagements that you might have?

**Michael K. Robinson** 22:46

I recently presented with the UN Women's Council, there have been also with WEBENC's We Thrive Education, I did their commencement had some words on that. So, there are a lot of different areas that we have, that I or my team has. One of my team members has just recently did in engagement in the Asia Pacific group, and I believe it was We Connect but I think it may have been in Singapore as we were giving education and a meet the buyer session there. So from a personal aspect, I have several on the horizon that are upcoming, and the team has some throughout the globe. So we try to get out, spread the word and educate because when we first became a what our program first started going global in 2003/2004. Supplier diversity was not well known outside of the US and to be honest, there's still a lot of education that you have to do outside of the US so we are intentional. And getting out the word globally on what we're doing and why we're doing it.

**April Harrison** 24:01

Michael, you are such a busy man, I can't thank you enough for spending this time with me and helping me learn a lot more about supplier diversity. And I'm also going to go and put on some jazz music, maybe some Miles Davis or Duke Ellington.

**Michael K. Robinson** 24:18

Hey, dude, I love Miles. Listen to some Grover, also. Grover was fantastic - Grover Washington. Put him in your rotation also.

**April Harrison** 24:27

Okay, I certainly will. It's been such a pleasure. Thank you again.

**Michael K. Robinson** 24:33

It has been my pleasure and thank you for this opportunity.

**April Harrison** 24:39

That's it for this episode of Procurement Block. I'd like to thank my guest Michael Robinson for joining me on the show. A Spotify playlist for Grover Washington will be in the show notes at [procurementblock.com](https://procurementblock.com). Procurement Block is produced by Trust Your Supplier. You can reach us at [procurementblockg.com](https://procurementblockg.com). Show notes are available on our website and you can leave your questions and comments via the listener comment form. Thank you for learning with me today. I'll leave you with wise words from Benjamin Franklin, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."