

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Hacia Atherton – Founder, Empowered Women in the Trades

Run Time: 20 minutes, 14 seconds

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey, with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. *The Fix* is more than a podcast, it's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. Well, Doug, listen, we have talked about reaching everyone in every place, and today, I can truly say we have circled the globe, and we are on the other side.

Doug: Yes, frequent flyer miles for this are going to be out of this world, Katherine.

Katherine: Absolutely.

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Doug: I tell you, today's guest, I think everybody's going to absolutely love her. She takes perseverance to a whole new level, based on her life's journey to get to this point, and I'm so excited to talk to her and learn about international involvement in women in the trades, and at the end of this, I also want to make sure that I get the recipe for fairy bread.

Katherine: With that introduction, let's welcome Hacia, who is the founder of Empowered Women in Trades from Australia. Welcome.

Hacia: Thank you so much for having me on the show. I'm so excited to be here, and I hope you flew first class all the way over to Australia.

Katherine: Absolutely. Go no other way, but thank you again for taking the time. I know it's eleven o'clock at night there, and we're starting our Tuesday, and you're ending yours, so what we wanted to talk through is just to understand a little bit about your journey here, and if you would talk to us about what really inspired you to create Empowered Women in the Trades, and how did your background contribute to this initiative?

Hacia: I'm actually a fifth-generation plumbing family, and my brother's a plumber, and I grew up in a family business that now manufactures medical infection control equipment, and when I was

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younger, we did mechanical services, and kitchens, and installs, and refrigeration stuff, and I'd always been involved in the family company, but I guess on the female side of the roles, reception, accounts, marketing, and all of the business acumen side of it all.

When I was 29, my dad actually said, "Off you go, and go work on the factory floor for the very first time." I'd grown up, like I've taken some of my first steps on this factory floor, but when I put my steel-cap boots on and high-vis, I went from this really confident Atherton female to, "Oh, shit," like just so overwhelmed, so scared. I was blaming my gender for not being able to weld, or not being able to strip wires, or do things like that. The amazing tradesmen around me said, "The world doesn't know if you're a girl or a guy, you're a human, and this is the first time that you've tried to join pipes, or bend pipes, or do different things like that."

I actually fell in love with welding as a trade, and I remember talking to my dad about this, and I'm like, "Why didn't you ever put the trades in front of me as a young child?" He looked at me a bit confused, and it's a different generation, my father's 80, so he looked at me a bit confused, but then he asked a really powerful question back to me. He goes, "Well, you never asked." I sat there and thought, "Wow." My own unconscious bias, coming from a fifth-generation trade family, literally learning to walk around the trades, be on-site, ride shotgun with my brother while he was doing his plumbing apprenticeship, and I was so immersed in the industry, but I never asked to have a go at the tools.

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I thought, "Wow, if that barrier to entry was in my own subconscious mind, how are women even considering or have any awareness of the career pathways within the industry?" I knew what a gas fitter was, I know what the difference between a roofer or a drainage plumber is, but if women weren't immersed in the industry like I were, how were they even going to ask the questions if I wasn't even asking the questions?

Between that and then establishing the actual heartbreaking poor treatment of women in the industry, which I did experience when I was in my high-vis more out in public, and I would get comments like, "Look at that high-vis candy, yum-yum," or, "It's not Halloween, love, why are you dressed up as a tradie?" All of this kind of perception that I didn't belong in the trades world because I was a woman. All of that kind of amalgamated with starting to understand, how can we really change this? That's through creating awareness among the female demographic of the amazing career pathways and the diversity of the careers in the industry, and how you can get into those careers, whether that's through an apprenticeship role or different ways of doing it.

Then also really working on my favorite piece of the coin, which is advocating for the change of the mindset within the industry, and the change of the mindset within men in the industry, of seeing that women play a very important role in the industry, and women's place is in the industry, women's place is in the tools. It's not in the kitchen, it is on-site, and it is on the tools.

Katherine: Yes, I love it, on the tools.

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Doug: Yes, absolutely, hands-on is always the best. I have a question for you. Mentorship is always a big part of the progression through whatever career path you take. In the trades, especially for women, it can be difficult sometimes because men will feel threatened if a woman is equal to them. What's your approach to the mentorship within your area, and how do you reinforce the fact that it doesn't make a male weaker if they help a woman achieve success?

Hacia: That's a fantastic question that I'm actually dedicating all of my research through my psychology studies. I've got a master's in applied positive psychology, and I'm a psychology student at the moment working towards getting my qualifications in organizational psychology, and I've really dug down into answering this question.

For me, first of all, it's working with the male demographic who, when they have their mindset like that, they're actually anchoring their masculine identity to their trade or to their job, hence why they find it so threatening, women being able to do the trade alongside them, because all of a sudden, they've got all these questions of like, "Am I less of a man because a woman can be a plumber? I thought I was a man because I am a plumber, and now the landscape of my trade is changing."

First of all, before we set up those mentorship programs, if they're co-gendered, it's really working with the male demographic first to make sure they've got a very strong foundation of how they perceive themselves as a man, and they're not anchoring their masculinity to their trade, they're

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anchoring it more to being a protector or being a provider or being a champion of actually holding space for their team where their team feels a deep sense of mateship and belonging. All of those aspects make them feel like a man, not their trade. Once you can do that shift within men, then there's absolutely no problems in the mentorship between men and women because they don't see women as a threat to their masculinity.

Katherine: Yes, that's great. We talk a lot about allyship, and I think that's the same type of comment there is that, are you open to creating that space for an allyship so that when there is an opportunity for different people to come onto a team, it is just who's the right person for the job, not necessarily male, female roles, for sure. Well said. I love that.

Hacia: Yes, exactly. Yes, it's just about stripping away that gender stereotyping before you start mentorship programs.

Katherine: Yes, which I think is really impactful. A lot of times, we just jump right to the program. I think your evaluation of stepping back and really understanding what it looks like and how people interact first before you can start to pair up people is really important from a mentorship program. I want to talk a little bit about the trade sector, and it often faces misconceptions and

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stereotypes. In your experience, how do these affect women and non-binary individuals considering a career in the trades, and what narrative would you like to change?

Hacia: Fantastic question, especially for the plumbing industry, and in Australia, it has a branding issue because people see it as dirty toilets and plumber's cracks.

Katherine: Same in the US. We're right there with you, same here.

Hacia: Which we understand our industry is so much more diverse and dynamic, and we're talking about 1% of the industry when you're talking about dirty toilets as well. For me, a big part and what I really advocate for people in the industry to do is start to talk to people outside of the industry of what it looks like. Because as soon as women start to understand the career path of being a gas fitter or a roofing plumber, or even if it is a sanitary plumber, but in new builds, and they start to understand that the industry is way more diverse than dirty toilets, they get really excited about the different career opportunities, as well as the advancement in technology. It's no longer really heavy lifting.

We've got BPAS, we've got so many different tools out there that make the trade so much easier and lighter weight in lifting. The materials are lighter and it changed. The more we can have this conversation, and the more I have that conversation with women, the more they go, "Wow, I had

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no idea that I could actually thrive in this industry, that there is so much diversity in the industry, and that we have progressed as an industry to a point that the tools and the job is something that a female with a female body or a non-binary person with a slightly lighter or smaller frame than your traditional heavy masculine men can actually go out there and do it."

This is why I love immersing women in the trades, because as soon as they get their hands on the tools and they can understand it, they can feel it, they can see it, they can do it, this aha moment of, "I can do this," really clicks in their mind. Unfortunately, society outside of our industry has a really outdated misconception of what the industry is about.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. We hear that on every conversation that we have. What we have seen is that more and more groups like Empowered Women in the Trades we've been talking to are really trying to work on changing that misconception. It dovetails right into this next conversation about collaboration and with the educational institution and sector, and industry leaders. Can you discuss what particularly success partnerships look like and impact it has had on increasing gender diversity in the trades with your organization?

Hacia: A great thing that we've been able to do here in Australia is really bring the trades education into the schooling system. From Year 7, as young as Year 7, so the students are 13, 12 to 13 years old, we bring in the BPAS systems and pipes and they're cutting pipes and they're joining

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them, and they're making fun little letters and they're really having fun with the trades. That is where we started to see such a shift in the mindset and the feedback we've got from those female students of, "I never knew this existed. I never would have considered it for a career. Now that I've done the program, I would consider this as a career. I know the questions to ask. I know I have curiosity to go and explore more."

With the collaboration, we do a lot of stuff with race plumbing over here as well, is really opening up the doors of opportunity for women to come in, in a safe space, whether it's a half day or a couple of hours to really immerse themselves and understand that they can do it and also understand what it looks like, what it feels like to do it. That's where the collaboration between industry and the education system is really important. I think getting the trades in front of female and non-binary students as early as possible is the most impactful way to make that meaningful long-term change. Because again, they're not going to ask the questions about how do they get into the plumbing industry if they're not aware of the careers they should be asking questions about.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. Couldn't agree more.

Doug: Yes. Question, so your organization have females, non-binary individuals. Obviously, it can be a scary situation for them to try something new, to go into an environment where they're already anticipating that, "Hey, this might be chaos, I might be uncomfortable." What

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encouragement do you give them to take that first step? How do you approach that for them to let them know they will be supported the entire way?

Hacia: That's looping back into a lot of the work around positive psychology and really starting to help them understand, first of all, their negative bias and their own negative self-talk. I often use that story of when I was in the factory, I was the one that was telling myself I couldn't do it because of my gender. I was the one that was actually telling myself that negative narrative.

The first step is really to call your own negative narrative that you might be having of yourself and really come at the industry with curiosity and ask questions. Be able to say, "Do we have female fitting uniforms, or can we get some female work boots or work pants," or different things like that. Just starting to communicate their needs and their desires, because, unfortunately, a lot of the men in the industry just aren't aware of the needs and desires that females need to have.

I always say to any woman coming into the industry, find your voice and speak up, not in a demanding way, but in a really questionable curiosity way, ask lots of questions, really focus on your achievements as well and celebrate those achievements, whether they're big or small, and really work with the industry to co-design the culture that you need as a female to thrive and never feel ashamed for putting your hand up and saying, "I'd like sanitary items in the first aid kit, because if we're on-site and my menstruation comes a day earlier and I'm caught off-site, if we

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have some sanitary items in the first aid kit, that's really going to help me." Just have the courage to say that because so many men wouldn't even be aware that that's a thing that we need.

Katherine: Sure, absolutely. As we start to close out our conversation, because I feel like we could probably talk here for hours with you, but you do need to go to bed.

Doug: She has to get to sleep.

[laughter]

Katherine: I would love for you just to take a couple of minutes to talk about our moments, talk about Empowered Women in the Trades, and maybe something that our community of listeners, how they can get involved or how they can help support you and your mission with empowered women.

Hacia: Yes, so our mission is to see the female representation in Australia at 30% by 2030. We're currently at 3%. We have a really ambitious goal. We're not going to do that without the support of industry. We've just launched our alliance membership platform as well, where industry can become a member of the movement and really support women in this area.

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The great thing about that as well is that it allows women to understand the organizations they can go to, to actually get employment, because a big struggle for women, particularly in Australia, is a lot of employers are actually refusing to interview them or give them an opportunity. I've heard that feedback as I started to research what's happening in the US, and there is similar feedback of US companies refusing to employ females.

That's why we wanted to launch the alliance to really bring together a beautiful community of organizations that are really excited to create a diverse and inclusive organization. Women don't have to call 20, 30, 40 employers to try and find someone that will take them on as an apprentice. They can look up the EWIT Alliance database and go, "Yes, this person or this company is very focused on diversity and inclusion. I know if I give them a call, I'll get an interview or I'll get a trial. I won't get the, sorry, we don't employ women in our apprenticeship programs."

Katherine: Oh, wow. It'll be interesting to see if those companies are around after some time by not having-- especially with how hard it is to get people in the workforce right now. I mean, not allowing women to come into your program to me seems mind-boggling, but I know it happens.

Doug: To be bold enough to say, "We don't accept women for interviews." I mean, wow.

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Katherine: Yes, for sure. What message would you like to leave our listeners with, especially those who might be considering a career in the trades or are in a position to support diversity and inclusion within their organization?

Hacia: For those thinking about entering in the trades, have a go, get out there on site, have a trial, have an opportunity. You're not going to know if you enjoy it and love it until you actually immerse yourself. Don't sit on the sidelines and go, "I think I can't," or, "It looks like I can't." Go have a crack, go have a go, do a week's trial. At the end of that week's trial, if you don't enjoy it, absolutely fine, but really have the courage to step out there and do it.

For those in the industry, my call to action always is speak to the diverse people in your network, your daughters, your cousins, your sisters, anyone in your network that is a female or a non-binary person, talk to them about our amazing industry, tell them about the diverse career pathways, bring them into your organizations for work experience when they're at school. We need to be proactive around really reaching out to people that aren't in the industry to spread the message of the fantastic career pathways that are in the industry. The industry has the power to do that. We need to get noisy about what's great about our industry.

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Katherine: That's right. Well, wonderful conversation today. Thank you so much for spending time with us this evening. We look forward to supporting your initiative and being a partner with you and helping you make change and drive change in Australia. Thank you so much, Hacia.

Doug: Thank you.

Hacia: Thank you. Thank you so much for your time.

[music]

[00:20:15] [END OF AUDIO]