

Reflections of Toyota

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(Originally posted on LinkedIn October 2019)



People often ask me what the main lessons were from my 13 years as a leader at Toyota.

I often tell the story of coming from Toys R Us with no background in automobile manufacturing. My wife nearly had to force me to put in an application to work at the newly built Toyota Kentucky facility. When I was hired, it did not take me long to realize that I was in the right system to build skill, learn from others, and reach higher levels of individual, team, and organizational capability.

The Toyota environment is special to me because it harnessed my capability to learn and my desire to interact with people. Those first years following 1989 when the Georgetown plant opened are many of my favorite professional memories of the level of camaraderie and teamwork.

The tenets of Lean thinking—continuous improvement and respect for people—are really what was harnessed to take a team of people in a similar position to me (with little to no experience in an automobile manufacturing environment) and to successfully launch a new plant in a foreign country. Toyota understood the challenges at hand and they took the necessary long-term, multi-generational approach to build a sustainable environment that continues to reach new heights. Fujio Cho, former president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky, frequently reminded us as leaders to go and see, ask why, and show respect.

I often look back at the experiences with my Japanese mentors as influential beyond the walls of Toyota Kentucky and applicable to life and leadership in all contexts. Continuous improvement was enacted through the everyday challenge to drive results, make problems visible, harness creative potential, and work for others. Respect for people was evident through the focus on building teams and forcing cross-functional engagement. It is also evident in the community outreach and the real-

ization of the potential of the next generation. I've been very grateful to have worked closely with the school districts surrounding the Toyota environment and to see how much emphasis is placed on building problem-solving and collaboration in the next generation.

Now I am in a position to share this knowledge with others. For the last 12 years since co-authoring *Toyota Culture* with Jeffrey Like, I have been fortunate to share the message of continuous improvement and respect for people with individuals and organizations around the globe. It brings me great satisfaction to see the level of initiative and deep responsibility that company leaders feel when they take on the role of servant leader. There is great fulfillment in creating environments for people to learn, grow, develop, and build functional skill that enables them to create value and respect others in the workplace, their homes, and their communities.

Benchmarking was a constant aspect of my experience as a leader, because it enables you to see differently to experience environments that have perhaps had a longer time and



experience on the journey. The challenges of leadership are much greater than simply possessing the right traits and abilities; it is a continuous process of creating new gaps toward higher levels of excellence and performance. I invite you to join me in the never-ending pursuit of principles, building companies with purpose, engaging team members through problem solving, and process improvement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Hoseus is Executive Director for the Center for Quality People & Organizations (CQPO). Mike brings both manufacturing operations and specialization in human resource experience to CQPO, an organization developed in 1999 as a vision of Toyota Motor Manufacturing to share Lean Quality philosophy and human resource practices with education, business, and community organizations. Mike is co-author with Dr. Jeffery Liker of *Toyota Culture*. Prior to CQPO, Mike was a corporate leader for 13 years at Toyota Motor Manufacturing's Georgetown, Kentucky plant both in human resources and manufacturing.

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